

# Hell Eyes

By Jezaray

Gen. disclaimer. This fic A.U.s off the end of the fifth book. Everything not recognizable from J.K. Rowling is original, this isn't a crossover.

## Chapter One: Into the Vortex

August 4, 1980

“James! James!” Lily flew into the room, in complete hysterics. In her arms little Harry wrinkled his nose in confusion. She clutched him to her chest wildly, eyes darting around the room as if expecting something to pop out at her at any moment. James sat stunned at the kitchen table, a bite of toast in danger of falling right out of his mouth.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Her terror transferred to him and he leapt to his feet. When she failed to answer, completely out of breath, he grabbed her shoulders.

“I was packing my toiletries in my travel bag when I heard Harry moving around in his room, and went to go see if he’d woken up. When I entered the room, there was a man standing over his crib.” She in a rush she added, “James, it was Dark Eyes.”

“A man-” James stopped mid sentence and the mad pace the energy in the room had previously been rocketing along at came to complete halt as he stared at her as though she’d sprouted a second head. “Dark Eyes.” He said slowly, skeptically. “And how do you know this was Dark Eyes?”

“If you’d seen him, you’d know.”

“A man in our home worries me. I am going to go have a look around and check the wards.” He pushed her into a chair and kneeled down, looking into her eyes. “Honey, Dark Eyes is a being from legends...a God. He does not sneak into people’s homes just to look at children.”

Knowing she'd lost him, Lily set her jaw stubbornly and turned away. "Well he did. He was standing over Harry, looking down, and when I came in he looked up at me." Her voice faded to almost a whisper. "He said something... something I didn't understand. Then he stepped backward and disappeared." Had Lily been facing him, James would have seen the way her cheeks flushed as they always did when she felt dishonest... when she lied.

On the verge of tears, Lily gazed down at her baby cradled against her and he smiled, pleased with the attention. She felt horrible regret, but how could she have prevented the whole situation from happening? "Next week is too far away. I want to move to Godric's Hollow now, today. I don't care if we leave half our stuff behind."

And so they did.

August 4, 1996

Harry lounged on his bed, exasperated. Half the summer- gone, wasted. And now only does he get the letter he'd been anticipating, the one that would free him from this hellish place. The contents weren't what he had expected. Instead of granting him freedom at the Weasleys, he was being summoned to Hogwarts a full month early by Dumbledore himself. Harry sighed. Hasn't he done enough already? Harry thought, breaking his rule of not dwelling on Sirius' death for about the ten-thousandth time. "Your friends will be joining you soon," Harry read aloud from the letter. Not Soon enough.

To further Harry's irritation, when he arrived at Hogwarts a mere day later, he waited in the headmaster's office for an indiscernible amount of time, ignored. The Headmaster was nowhere to be seen. Harry started poking through Dumbledore's things, not looking closely at any of it, but when he caught his name on top of a small pile of papers, he took notice. There were several clippings from the summer's Daily Prophet about him; he'd seen them all already. Underneath was a birth certificate. His. He scanned it.

Behind him the door clicked shut. Harry had never even heard it open. Turning around, he faced Dumbledore, who looked mildly surprised. Whatever Dumbledore was going to say next, Harry cut him off.

"Headmaster?" Harry asked curiously. "Why is my place of birth blank?"

There was a tense silence as Harry waited expectantly for the headmaster to respond. I hope he's not be keeping any more secrets from me, after what happened last time. Dumbledore seemed a bit lost for words and he contemplated his answer before replying.

"You learned that sooner than I'd thought to tell you. That piece of paper, in fact, is the reason I asked you to come days before the others arrived, so we could talk privately." In Harry's opinion, it was much too long before he continued as he made his way around his desk and seated himself, gazing thoughtfully at the birth certificate. "If you had a birth certificate made, Harry, it was either lost or destroyed. Many students are enlisted at Hogwarts from early childhood, and for the Hogwarts records of you we compiled the one you are holding in your hands now. Unfortunately, Lily claimed to have a personal midwife and unlike most did not check in to St. Mungos. Near the end of her pregnancy, she and James disappeared for a couple days, we assumed with the midwife. We never found this woman, or where she lived. So after discussing it, we opted to leave it blank instead of making up a birthplace."

"We'... meaning who?"

"A few of us among the staff- several Professors including Hagrid."

"How come nobody has ever mentioned it?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"Is it important?" Dumbledore inquired calmly.

"Well, one does like to know a little about oneself, am I right? Things about me are my business and I have the right to know all of it."

"Had you asked, we would have readily answered."

Harry put down the newspaper clippings, and folded the birth certificate into his pocket without asking for permission. His shoulders

were tense as he crossed his arms tightly. He was tired and just wanted to leave.

“You said that you brought me here early to speak with me?”

“I apologize for keeping you waiting so long, somebody required my immediate attention.” Dumbledore pulled out one of the stacks of papers, flipping through it rapidly. “When something special turns up, about every couple years, it is not uncommon for me to take in a group of students during the summer break. Coming back to school may not seem like the greatest way to spend your days off, but it’s actually quite an opportunity. We always learn something extraordinary, or go traveling in magical lands. This year I pulled together a large group of students as this is possibly the most magnificent jaunt yet. As Hermione and Ron are among them, I assumed you would want to come as well.”

“Yes,” Harry affirmed. “Definitely. Where are we going?”

“I was just down an the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where visitors came and set up a portal. The portal leads somewhere not on this world. A place entirely different from our own, therefore a cornucopia of fascinating things we have never encountered before. A new landscape, new applications for magic, and a society entirely unique from us. Most wizards will not make a trip like this in their entire lives. As a matter of fact, I have never been there myself. Thankfully we have a guide and several professors to come help as well.”

Harry was temporarily awed, but still not to be distracted. “What’s this got to do with me?”

“I looked through some records and discovered that your parents traveled between our world and the next many times. On occasion your father’s family accompanied them. The records are very imprecise, they mark only the departure time of individuals going into the portal and merely a confirmation of their return. The portal can warp time slightly as well, therefore we have no way of gauging how much time James and Lily spent there altogether. My suspicion- and it is entirely plausible- is that Lily decided to go there for your birth.”

Looking as if he'd been slapped in the face, Harry dropped his arms to his sides and gripped his chair tightly.

"I thought it would be appropriate for me to share this new information and my suspicion discreetly, before the others arrived." Dumbledore waited expectantly, and when Harry said nothing he continued. "You realize what this means, Harry? You could have family there from your father's side, and there might be more behind why you survived the night that Voldemort attacked your family."

Still Harry did not reply. Abruptly, he got to his feet and walked out. He left the office door open, and Dumbledore could hear his footsteps slowly fade. Concerned, he made a mental note to speak with Harry again first thing the next morning, and the door swung itself shut, loudly complaining.

Not surprisingly, Harry was unable to sleep. His brain was overloaded for the moment. It was him alone in all of Gryffindor tower, locked up like a forgotten ghost in his dorm room. The other beds were empty and bare, and Harry found the room to be unnaturally silent without the loud breathing of his roommates. For the third time that night, Harry climbed out of bed and went to sit, shivering, on the windowsill. Outside it was almost entirely dark, as only the smallest sliver of the moon was shining. Still he pressed his forehead to the glass, eyes searching the darkness for the edge of the Forbidden Forest. The portal was out there- something mysterious that waited for him. Or maybe it's just my imagination, hoping to find out more about my parents, anywhere, even if it risked traveling to other worlds.

Two days until the others arrived, two whole days. Harry bit his lip. Don't be stupid, Harry. Don't do it. He was no stranger to breaking big rules to save himself or others, but doing something frivolous was not quite his style. And there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell he was going to go down there and go through the portal himself, which would be suicide. Dumbledore himself needed a guide and Harry wouldn't even know how to get back. Besides, there was no point, he'd have no way of finding information on his own. They probably spoke a different language there.

I'm not planning to go through the portal though. Harry reasoned with himself. I just want to go see what's down there. There's no harm in that!

Harry quickly pulled on a few layers of clothing, as well as his invisibility cloak, just in case. Doing something he'd never attempted in all his years at Hogwarts, he grabbed his broom and swung the window open as far as it could go. An icy wind tore into the room, pushing him back a step. It made his eyes tear up and he shivered harder than ever. It's summer, honestly.

With a feeling of great unease, Harry flung himself into the wind. A moment later he was safely on his broom, buffeted this way and that but still making good progress. When he reached the edge of the forest he turned left and flew as far as to the edge of the grounds, then turned back and flew all the way to the lake. He was completely numb by now, and hadn't seen anything. Disappointed, Harry decided to take a closer look before leaving and landed on the bank of the lake, taking a path that would eventually end at Hagrid's hut.

It only got darker and windier from then on, and finally Harry admitted defeat. There simply wasn't anything out there.

All of a sudden Harry's broom was knocked out of his hands as his feet were whipped out from under him, plunging him into the dark. He struggled, but the ground was gone and he couldn't even see the moonlight any more. Tucking his legs up to his chest, Harry felt a terrible wave of fear rise in chest.

This wasn't right.

What have I done?

December 15, 1980 - Godric's Hollow

He was the God who'd created his people, so James knew Dark Eyes existed. He couldn't stop thinking about what Lily had said. He couldn't help wondering what had convinced her it was Dark Eyes, and if it could be true. It wasn't until months after the fact that James

realized what it would mean if it was. He sought out Lily, her behavior lately supported a possible explanation.

“Lily.” Said James firmly, feeling hollow inside.. “When Dark Eyes appeared, what did he say?”

Lily didn’t look surprised by his question.

“He said he was sorry.” She said softly, regretfully.

At this James covered his face with his hands, collapsing down onto a nearby chair. When his face reappeared, it was deeply anguished.

## Chapter Two: Strange but Beautiful

"Did you take any precautions?" James asked.

"Of course." Said Lily "Your sister helped me."

"Are they strong enough?"

"They should be."

"I am... so sorry... for not believing you."

When Harry's feet finally hit solid ground, he was so battered that his legs gave out in exhaustion. Driven by terror alone, he was able to lift his head and look around. There was no way this place could be mistaken for Hogwarts; the wind was dead and the ground he kneeled on was solid stone. Harry got off his scraped knees to stand. It was black as night, but a misty fog everywhere was glowing slightly. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw no sign of a portal of any kind. Either the opening was invisible like its other end, or it had closed. Harry wasn't sure whether to step backward and see if it would send him back to Hogwarts or not. He wanted to get back to the tower as fast as he could and be safely back in his room, which he never should have left. He was afraid of the portal though, not sure if he'd find his way back through it again. It may be wiser to look for help. He looked back and forth, unsure of which way to go.

And then she was there. Out of the mist so silently it was as if she had simply appeared, about 10 feet away. She stood looking at him wordlessly. Harry froze. Her expression was expectant and unsurprised, Harry had the eerie feeling she'd been waiting for him.

Her age was hard to tell, she was certainly much older than him, yet by how much he couldn't tell. Her eyes were tawny golden, her hair was a similar gold with warm brown undertones, and she was very beautiful. Her dress was long and simple and over it she wore a warm cloak.

"How did you come to be here?" She asked.

"Um..." uncertainly Harry pulled an explanation together. "I accidentally went through a portal and here I am."

"Impossible."

"What? Why?"

"There is no portal established here." She studied him intensely. Harry's chill of fear returned. Hopefully she's as nice as she is pretty.

"I'll take you with me for now." She decided, and gestured for him to follow. Harry exhaled, unaware that he'd been holding his breath. However his next attempt at breathing was similarly sabotaged- his lungs exploded in a spasm that pushed all the air out of his body, as if Hagrid had punched him in the chest.

"Aarghah!" Harry yelled intelligibly. "You have wings!" They had been folded behind her back, out of his line of sight.

Her face arranged itself in an expression of confusion. She eyed him oddly. "I am quite aware." Her wings were the same color as her hair- mostly gold with touches of warm brown- and reached from near the top of her head, to mid-calf. "And you apparently do not, therefore I assume the portal you were meaning to take was supposed to take you to the City of the Half-people. How you ended up here is far, far beyond me." The winged woman hadn't seemed angered by any of this, rather, she was inquisitive.

Inquisitive is good. Inquisitive doesn't get people killed...unless you're being dissected of course. Harry cringed. "Half-people? That doesn't sound good, I don't think I'd want to go to a city of half-people."

"I am referring to those like yourself, those without an identity feature. You have only the base of what a person is; therefore you are only half a person. Tell me, do half-people have only half a soul, as it's rumored?"

"I don't... th-think so..." Harry stuttered, flustered. Then, insulted, and feeling an urge to defend himself in some way, he added, "People aren't what you see- the person is what's inside, therefore what their

body is composed of shouldn't make a difference whether they are an entire person. I know I'm real."

"How do you know, when your poor half life is all you've ever experienced?" She asked. "You know nothing about my people, therefore you can't compare. I doubt you'd be able to understand even if I described it to you, 'Half-person'." Her voice was laced with pity.

Harry traded some of his fear for a fair bit of anger. Even then, nothing came to mind that he could bring himself to say. He was falling behind and hurried to catch up, running right out of the mist. There wasn't much to see just more stone ground ahead ending abruptly at a sheer cliff wall that stretched into the sky past visibility. They approached it, and several large black shadows materialized into dark tall cave openings like doors. The stone was steel gray and dense, only magic could have made the doorways that perfect. Harry had a very, very bad feeling. The cave emanated a great feeling of unease, and the air was as still and dead as the path where his footsteps wound behind him. Do people live here? I can't imagine so; the energy of this place wouldn't be so completely lifeless. Perhaps they are the ones without souls.

Reaching the nearest doorway, she stopped right before walking in and stepped to the right, leaning against the wall, thus facing him again. Harry felt the full weight of her gaze.

He shivered. "I just want to go home."

She suddenly appeared as uncomfortable as he was- another first for this mysterious woman. "You are home."

"What-" Deep in the mist, Harry repeatedly heard quiet footsteps, coming from all directions. He stepped backward, and crouched down, looking around wildly. He couldn't focus on her strange statement, the sounds suggested a group of people was closing in on them. "In what way do you mean?" He asked finally.

"I had my suspicions before, when you appeared, but now I am sure. Tell me- what's that around your neck?"

Harry looked down, surprised. Sure enough, there was something there... something that hadn't been there before. It wasn't anything pretty, or special looking, but rather very plain. A short simple chain fused to a dull rock.

"I wasn't wearing that before I went into the portal!" Harry protested, picking up the stone.

"Nevertheless it is around your neck." Her voice was matter-of-fact. Harry turned his focus to her, glaring.

"Who are you? You know what's going on, don't you, and you're not telling me."

"Indeed I have solved the mystery you represent." She whistled sharply, so loudly that it echoed all around them. Harry jumped. The footsteps returned, loud and growing closer.

"Who did you call?" he asked, still in his spot. Do I get away from her and run? Can I avoid anyone out there if I do? Or should I go into the cave entry...He shuddered. That wasn't an option. Harry fumbled in his pocket for his wand... but it wasn't there. He panicked inside, and struggled to keep his composure.

"There is no where to run, Cursed. We are not on level ground; we are in fact in a deep, deep pit. No way in or out, unless you fly. Not even the sun reaches us." Harry didn't know what to think of her demeanor. She was confident, leaning back apathetically, though the look on her face was anything but. And he couldn't even begin to understand what she was rambling on about. "Do you know anything of your people, your heritage?" She asked, as if they were sitting down for tea, and there wasn't anybody coming out of the darkness to get them...

"No. I... I don't know." His mind flickered briefly over his recent memories, Dumbledore's words about his birthplace. Dumbledore, who suddenly seemed so very far away. And he was; nobody would come to Harry's rescue now. "Does this mean something?" He asked her, holding up the stone.

"It's one of ours."

"Well, your people aren't very artistically inclined, are you?" He snapped, so confused it was making him mad.

"The amulet wasn't intended as such." Her eyes widened a bit. "NO! Don't take it off."

Almost snarling at her, Harry ripped it over his head forcefully and threw it at her feet. "If it's one of yours, then keep it. I want to go home. Stop being so damn evasive, are you going to help me or not!"

She looked down at the amulet but made no move to pick it up. Instead she leaned backward, inching away. She looked over his shoulder with relief as someone thumped up to them behind Harry's back. No longer caring about the woman, Harry turned to see a man coming towards him. The intent on his face was clear. Another came out on the left. They were both wearing dark blue and both were equally large and intimidating. Their wings, similar to hers but differing in color, arched around them menacingly.

So Harry ran right.

Before he could put any distance between himself and his attackers another one came out of the mist dead ahead, and Harry smashed into him. He struggled, and soon the others behind him had a grip on each of his shoulders. Behind them more emerged to form a circle, and from somewhere distant he heard the golden winged woman call something to them. Someone had his collar in their grasp in such a way that it was causing him breathing difficulty, and he felt his face burn hot as he gasped for air.

Everything went fuzzy and drifted away. Am I passing out ... and his thought never got the chance to finish.

## The Bloodbeast Claw

Phia was a Silent. Her people flew in the air, living in a world far above everybody else. Phia wasn't very strong, and it was hard to fly for long distances. It was enough of a struggle to fly down the mountain ranges from the deep dark pit where her people lived in caves that lined the inside.

Phia loved visiting her oasis. It wasn't too far to walk, especially if you flew for short distances. She always arrived exhausted but it was worth it. It wasn't an oasis in the desert; it was a tranquil, beautiful place that differed greatly from the tangled half jungle/half forest that was the Ayan Wilderness. She was near the Divide, the long strip of land where the forest abruptly stopped, subdued by the encroaching plains. From the Divide on there was rippling grass as far as the eye can see, with scattered bunches of trees. In some places the grass was so high even the centaurs were completely hidden. Which is terribly good for hiding in case something dangerous comes along.

Phia's little sister Nesie, who was barely old enough to join studies with the elder Silents, had a habit of following her sister everywhere. Nesie had boundless energy and enthusiasm and managed the trip with only moderate difficulty. She tripped along behind Phia, happily leaping over logs like a long-legged cactus frog.

At the oasis at last, Phia slipped her bare feet into the clear water of a large deep pond, smiling. There was a cluster of large rocks sticking up out of the water almost in the exact middle of the pond, and she fluttered there to perch. Nesie followed her exactly, but ended up falling right off the rocks and into the water. She reappeared, grumpy and cold. Clamoring ungracefully onto a large flat rock, Nesie flapped her wet wings furiously, but they remained soggy.

Phia opened her mouth to laugh, and got about one syllable out before something CRASHED down into the water behind her. She leapt backwards onto Nesie's rock, almost falling in the water herself.

Half in the water, half on the rock where Phia had perched only seconds earlier, was a colossal Bloodbeast. Phia was more scared than she had ever been in her life. Nesie whimpered. Bloodbeasts

were half humanoid creatures, that lumbered upright sometimes but easily went down on all fours, bounding along at great speeds. They often grew very big and this one was exceptionally so. Muscles bulged underneath its haunches and shoulders. Murderous red eyes peered out from its face, under peaked ears. His hair grew forward into a mess at the front, and fur crept down starting short and fuzzy around his upper torso and became long and shaggy near the rear where a long tail with a tuft on the end whipped back and forth. On each elongated back foot (on which his toes supported him and his heels left the ground completely) and stubby paw-like hands were thick pads for running on. The main issue with Bloodbeasts-gargantuan claws and many sharp teeth, as well as a taste for flesh. The claws where the crowning glory on the beast; they were large, shiny, and very impressive.

It was out hunting and they were the prey. Phia's shock was accompanied by confusion. Bloodbeasts come from the desert, which was beyond even the expansive grasslands. What was one doing here, at the Divide?

The Bloodbeast had yet to move, he waited with a grin on his face and he observed them on their rock. Sitting above them, he could easily swat them down if they tried to fly, and if they made a run for it he would be on them in one pounce. This was the end, for both of them. They were about to become lunch. The Bloodbeast crouched down, preparing to leap. Phia and Nesie huddled together, eyes squeezed shut. Phia hugged her protectively, a futile gesture that made their last moments a tribute to their sisterhood and lifelong friendship.

Phia held her breath- and behind her came a tremendous crashing splash of water, soaking them. Gasping, they looked. The Bloodbeast was knocked down in mid-spring and carried down into the pond water. Under the water he struggled with something large and black like a shadow. The shadow was clearly winning, the Bloodbeast struggling to go up for air to no avail. Finally with a great kick the Bloodbeast threw it off and they both surfaced. The shadow emerged and leapt back onto a rock, easily recovered.

Phia didn't know whether to be relieved- or to simply piss herself. On one side was the biggest Bloodbeast she'd ever seen, and perched on the rock was one of the Cursed. His black wings were so huge they stretched from above his head down to his heels. The Cursed Silents had a history of their own, but all that mattered at that moment was how dangerous a Cursed became when enraged. Its eyes glowed, the light flickering ominously. The Bloodbeast snarled with fury and indignation. The Cursed sat confidently, not flinching once. The Bloodbeast leaped- and the Cursed batted him back into the water with one big swipe of his hand. He followed through the air, coming down hard on its back. They wrestled on the banks, rolling and clawing. There was a flurry of frenzied movement and the Bloodbeast howled. It howled as if the world was ending with his pain, obvious wounded. With one final attack, the Cursed turned to curve a wing around himself, and slashed the Bloodbeast's face, the razor sharp edges of his primary wing feathers cutting him deeply.

Defeated, the Bloodbeast fled, and could be heard stomping through the underbrush as it stumbled toward the grasslands.

Phia didn't rejoice yet, she held her breath, curled tight around Nesie as if making themselves as small as possible would leave them unnoticed. Both girls peeked out under their arms.

The Cursed stood stock still. He saw them. He was looking right at them. Now that Phia came to think of it- a Cursed marauding through the forest in a fit of rage was just as inconceivable as the presence of the Bloodbeast.

As the seconds ticked away, it looked as if he was not going to attack them after all. She felt hope rising within her chest. They were going to make it through.

On the bank, the Cursed One gave them a quick nod. A NOD, Phia thought incredulously, HE NODDED AT US. He then peaceably turned to leave.

Something burst out of Nesie, right at the last moment before he disappeared, her voice exploding into the still air.

"Thank you."

Then, they flew away, so terrified they sprinted as fast as they could for the mountain, not stopping until they were safe. They were definitely not going to go adventuring again any time soon.

Harry woke abruptly, royally pissed off. He shook off sleep and the remains of a surreal, haunting dream.

Where am I?

Harry surveyed his surroundings, a chilly small box of a room, the walls and ceiling solid stone. Harry had the impression of being deep underground. It's a prison!

In one corner there was a small door of bars, from his position in the middle of the room everything beyond was dark and vague. He looked down at himself, disgusted. He was filthy, he'd been lying in some sticky goop. Leaves were stuck to him as well as several small sticks and stones. He was bruised and he had a killer headache throbbing right behind his eyes in the middle of his head.

BOTH ankles were tightly shackled to the floor, with a bit of chain. He wriggled over to the door, pushing himself with his hands through the grime. Then he felt a stabbing pain worse than even his headache. The side of his jaw was if on fire if he moved it even the tiniest bit. He reached up to touch it, but it was swollen and inflamed, and he flinched and whipped his hand away. What happened? I passed out, what did they fucking beat me or something? What on earth IS this stuff I'm stuck in!

Footsteps slowly approached in the hallway, and Harry pushed himself back to his original spot. He set his face in a glare, but he was scared. He was really, really scared. He'd done something truly stupid, and now he was in another world all alone with no idea what was going on. The Golden Lady seemed like she was going to help me at first... what happened, was it all a lie? Was she setting me up? She did! She did set me up! Footsteps stopped next to his cell

brought him back to the present moment. It was a man, half shrouded with darkness, but a visible swath of cloth went around his shoulders, cinched into his odd uniform, and a bright blue symbol was stamped on the side of his thigh. He seemed to be staring at Harry. This went on for a minute or so, and Harry busied himself with giving the man the best death glare he could muster in this situation.

"I expected you to be bigger," the man commented, turned away smartly, and marched off.

Is this whole world completely insane?

Harry sat for a bit, giving up hope of anybody stopping by again. He then lay down on the floor, ignoring the grime and closed his eyes. His mind drifted for a bit, different images flickered through his mind at a rapid pace. Ron and Hermione, who were coming to travel with him, Quidditch, sitting in the common room with his mates in front of a warm fire chatting and telling tales of the summer. That's where I'll be when term starts, if I can get back that is... A different image intruded. The Golden Woman leaning against the wall, her gorgeous face watching him with an unfathomable expression. Harry eyes drifted lazily open but the image remained.

He jumped. He must have drifted asleep because a woman was standing above him, looking down. It wasn't The Golden Woman after all, but she had nice brown hair and graceful wings, maybe in her early twenties. She was biting her lip viciously; Harry could see traces of blood there.

"If we let you out will you promise to cooperate?"

Smeared with filth and horribly embarrassed, he decided to go for sarcasm. "Well, that depends, you don't plan on BEATING me do you? Or stuffing me in ANOTHER little box to rot? Because I would have bit of a problem with that."

"No. We will not harm you, only take you to somewhere else, where it is clean. These holding cells are extremely filthy, and you look injured." She said, suddenly concerned. "I'll bet you remember nothing, am I right?"

“Remember what?”

“How you came to be here.”

“No... I don’t.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure somebody will fill you in later. Will you be coming with me, or staying here?”

Harry pushed himself to a sitting position, his shackled legs out in front of him.

She pulled out a key and reached for the shackles then hesitated, giving him a stern look. “And you promise you won’t take that amulet off?”

Harry looked down; sure enough the ugly rock was back. Why didn’t I notice it?

“I promise.” He agreed, desperate. She unlocked the shackles and Harry got to his feet unsteadily.

“Follow me.” As they entered the hall, at a slow manageable pace for Harry’s sake, he saw she was accompanied by a man, a different one than before but dressed in the same uniform. His face was hard and emotionless. Harry decided to keep an eye on this man, who followed them closely, hands in his pockets. They came to some stairs, which they followed up two flights. The air got cleaner and more breathable, but not by much. There were several more doors of solid wood this time and not prison bars. She peeked inside the first door, and then opened it wide. “We’ll leave you your privacy now, and return later. Knock on the door when you’re finished. Understand?”

“I’m not deaf, so yes.”

She took no notice of his tone and took his arm to help him inside. It was a nice room, very well kept, with a cot and a chair and long bench on the far wall. No windows of course.

'No way in or out, unless you fly. Not even the sun reaches us,' The Golden Lady had said.

Behind him the door closed, Harry heard the lock click, annoyed. But then he discovered he'd previously overlooked a treasure- an enormous, water filled bathtub. There was soap, washcloths, and fresh towels. Harry dipped his hand into the water, it was comfortably hot. Not wasting any time Harry folded his clothes into a pile on the bench and stepped right in. He sunk down until only his nose and eyes were above water, soaking in the warmth. Feeling his aches and pains fade away, Harry was able to finally relax a little.

Maybe it's not so bad after all, maybe they're planning to let me go. They at least said they'd take me somewhere nicer. He stood and scrubbed himself with a soapy washcloth as hard as he could. There were layers and layers of dirt and gunk that lifted off into the water, but Harry stepped out clean, wrapping himself in the nice soft towels. He looked for a drain, finding one, pulled it free and the dirty water disappeared down the hole, gurgling.

They must have heard it outside because there came a sharp rap on the door and the man spoke for the first time. "All finished in there?" He demanded. Harry opted for not directly pissing them off and simply said yes. No sounds came from the other side of the door for several minutes, during which Harry made himself comfortable sitting on the cot. A key turned in the lock and Harry watched the door apprehensively.

The brown haired woman walked in, turning her head back as she did so. "Come, my heart, it's safe,"

A younger girl followed some ways behind. She looked skittish. 'My heart'? Are they related in some way? They certainly don't look alike.

The new younger female was small in stature with much lighter coloring, a bit of orange tinged her very light hair as well as her little white wings. They reached from the top of her shoulders to about mid thigh. They were much smaller than all of the others', and Harry couldn't imagine her actually flying with them, though he assumed her

weight compensated proportionally. She reminded him a great deal of a porcelain angel.

Brown Hair held something out: a set of clothes. When he took them they both turned their backs so he could get dressed. The top had long sleeves, but was very thin material. The bottom was similar, simple draw string pants and some roughly made boots he could slip into. Contrasted against their fancy clothes, he felt ridiculous. He sat back down loudly on the cot, and they swiveled back around towards him. The brown haired woman stood back, observing them from over her companion's shoulder.

"My name is Kahd, I'm a healer," The little angel introduced herself. "Where are you injured? Here? And here?" She reached out and went of his right leg just above the knee were the skin was torn up. He gestured pointedly toward his jaw. Kahd looked up into his face, and reached out, and grabbed his jaw. In his head Harry yelled in shock... but the pain he awaited never game. Her hand left a cooling sensation that was slowly numbing the pain. "How'd you do that?" He asked, amazed.

"I'm a healer." Kahd shrugged. "I think I can help you, so sit still!" She grabbed his jaw again, turning it this way and that to inspect it. Almost immediately, she turned his head down towards her. "Open your mouth as far as you can." She asked. He did his best but her pain numbing didn't quite reach that far. She held put both hands on his face, spreading the feeling of cool water rippling through his body. Finally she reached right into his mouth. She poked in his left back check for a while, and then suddenly pulled at something.

"... AARGH!" Harry was hurled out of the calm hypnotic state her hands had put him in. "Whazzat?"

"Sorry dear, we've got to get that out before it gets infected." Warily, he submitted and she reached back into his mouth. In his back cheek, she pulled back, and something slid out. Harry almost bit her hand involunatarily but she got it out in time.

Kahd ran the water in the bathtub and washed her hands of Harry's blood.

Harry's jaw hurt like hell, but there was a release of pressure too. Glancing up, he saw Brown Hair eyeing him strangely. Her expression was a cross between amused and awed. Kahd stepped forward and held out her hands, palms flat. In them was a long metallic claw, curved and vicious looking. "You seem to have bitten this off into your mouth." She commented passively, inspecting it. "What an interesting thing to do."

"Perhaps you would like to keep it?" She asked and Harry slowly picked it up, his fingers curving around its shiny, cold exterior. For a moment, something visualized something in his head, but it was fuzzy and distorted. Blood pouring from open wounds, deep dark waters...

He held it tightly in his hand as his wounds were healed as much as possible, and bandaged up. A package of food was provided, a slab of cold but cooked meat, some odd nuts, and a long red vegetable. Harry inhaled it. He was starving, when was the last time he ate? The food tasted strange, but good, he supposed none of it existed on Earth, the red vegetable he was sure he'd never seen. They also gave him a sweet milky colored drink. Clean, bandaged, and sated, he felt good as new.

Harry got to his feet; they each took one of his elbows and led him out the door to where the man waited. He yet again followed, not five steps behind. They took the flight of stairs again. He vaguely realized they were going down again. They got to another prison block, long with lots of doors. Harry peered into the cells he passed.

"Why am I being held prisoner?" He demanded.

Brown Hair was the one to speak. "We're a rather protective society, Harry James Potter. We take care of our own. We view you as a threat, and as a threat you must be dealt with in an appropriate way."

Harry tried to mumble a reply, which wasn't coherent but ended "... how do you know my name?"

"We have records of your family living here. Your father was native but he married one of the half-people... though I've heard she was a

very nice woman non-the-less. They often spent time here with his family, the Raschadin. Therefore you're one of our own- which makes you subject to our laws."

Harry walked along unsteadily. Something was vaguely bothering him about what she was saying. There is something about what she's saying, something that's nagging me. What is she saying? Should it mean something to me? Is it important? Harry couldn't seem to quite focus on what she'd just said on a conscious level, instead forming one last coherent, sarcastic comment, which he slurred. "Ha, no, you freaks got the flappers." I can't one of you, you've all got wings, is what he'd been TRYING to say.

Their arms holding him up suddenly became crucial; he couldn't seem to walk straight. Something about this is wrong. What is it? Concentrate Harry...

"You drugged me!" He accused, angrily. The milky drink left a sweet aftertaste in his mouth, which now started to taste sour and acidic. He tried to shake one of them off, but only to stumble right back into her.

"In here, Harry." Said Brown Hair, and pushed him into one of the cells. The room blurred, and he couldn't seem to look at it. He pushed up his glasses as if they would help but they couldn't clear a problem that was in his brain.

"Stupid flapper-people." Harry mumbled.

"To answer your previous comment regarding those..." The man spoke up from the doorway as they sat him down. "If you're not one of us, why don't you take your amulet off sometime and find out?" The man sneered.

"NO, that is NOT a good idea!" Kahd glared at the man hard enough for him to step backward in surprise, not expecting this from the small, delicate angel. "That would be too much of a shock for him, he's recovering! Harry, do not touch that amulet, understand?"

"Eh."

The door clicked shut and Harry stumbled toward the back, luckily enough coming to a bed made of a mattress lying on top of a large slab of stone and appeared to have been created along with the cave room itself, as it merged one with the wall and floor. Whoa big bed. I'm in the luxury...suite...

'Do not touch... touch that amulet... understand?' echoed in his mind.

Plunking himself down on the edge of the bed, Harry yanked at the amulet, having trouble getting it over his head as his coordination was shot. He dropped it to the floor and flung himself backward on the bed. On the ceiling, swirled images were forming in the stone, and he watched them for a while. He felt so calm now. So calm.

## Chapter Four: Mistake of the Gods

The second time Harry woke to find himself in a jail cell, he lay groggily on his back, still tired. Outside the hall was bustling, and people called loudly down the corridor to each other. All of this was rather different than the 'holding cells'. It sounded like they kept the prison full, whereas the day before it had been dead silent as he awoke, and there certainly hadn't been lots of people in the hall. Harry disliked the word prison... it implied that he'd committed a crime. He was only in captivity after all. Maybe the other prisoners are captives too?

Curious now, Harry rolled out of bed. Only he didn't.

While trying to roll, Harry found himself stuck in place, and went nowhere. He looked around for a reason, and his eyes fell down to his chest. A black feather lay there, it had almost gone unnoticed. What the hell?

Through a thick fog he could vaguely remember the night before, and what had escaped him then was brutally obvious now that he was- or almost was- in his right mind.

"Your father was native..."

He sat up awkwardly and by the time he was sitting on the edge of his bed he already knew. Resignedly, Harry looked over each shoulder. Massive feathery black wings were shoved out in front of the bed to either side of him at an uncomfortable angle that pulled at his back.

'I can't be one of you, you've all got wings.'

Having proved himself wrong, Harry mentally chucked the chains he normally kept locked around his strongest beliefs out an open window. They had been completely busted open. The only thing this compares too is when Hagrid told me I was a wizard and could do magic... Hey Harry, you come from another world, and you've got wings! When slid forward to stand his toes touched something on the floor. It was his amulet, exactly where he'd thrown it. Picking it up, Harry rolled it in

his hands. His fingers tingled and Harry dropped the amulet, surprised.

"If you're not one of us, why don't you take your amulet off sometime and find out?"

Not an idle threat. Obviously the amulet was the key. Stepping over it, Harry did the only thing one can do when presented with revelations that important- he paced. Body changed, he had difficulty adjusting to the added weight, and was therefore having balance issues. Yet he didn't feel much like putting the amulet back on. On some level, his brain had thought, this is... SO COOL... which he was starting to doubt. Did he want anything to do with these crazy people? Not really, they hadn't been very nice. In the end what decided it was simply that with his new wings, he felt more confident. Before, they had tried to treat as an inferior 'Half-person', now he would be their equal, and have a foothold in... whatever was going on. He was alone on a strange world, but at least he could fit in somewhat. The cell seemed much less intimidating all of a sudden. He would no longer be the Half-person prisoner to be pitied, and put him on a level with the others.

The others... remembering his original objective, Harry strode to the door and leaned against the bars so he could have a good look.

As far as he could see down the hallway either side, which wasn't very far, were more cells, and in some of them winged people stood looking out as he was doing. Startled, Harry tried to follow their gaze. The flurry of activity he'd heard out in the hall was actually breakfast. Stomach rumbling suddenly, Harry watched the line of people coming and going with food get closer. It was slow progress.

No quidditch, no friends, not even potion's homework! What else do I have to do? As mad as I was at the Dursleys, at least I knew someone was COMING for me.

Finally they moved to his own door, and neatly set a pile of food in front of him. Harry was at a bit of a loss for a moment. When they'd put a pile of food on his, correction, platter, they'd really piled it on. There was a small section of the bottom bar on the door taken out so

that stuff could be slid through, but there was no way the food would fit. He sat, stumped.

"I see I've got a neighbor now," Somebody said nearby, and Harry looked to his right, as obvious only a pair of hands were visible. The hands and voice were consistent with an older man. "So you're the one they've been talking about. Welcome to the Keep."

"Er, yeah I guess..." Harry eyed his drink, peering inside. "Is this food safe?"

"Of course not."

Harry's mood sank.

"Eat it anyway, they're not gonna kill you. Not eating isn't going to get you out of here anyway, the system's too secure." He must have noticed Harry still hadn't touched his food, because he asked, "Food doesn't fit?"

"Yeah!"

"Hmm." Harry's neighbor grumbled, "Happens sometimes" very unhelpfully and scraped his own platter into his cell. Hoping he'd found someone to talk to, Harry ate half-heartedly through the bars of his door. Before he knew it the whole plate of food was gone, consumed while he was lost in thought, and he blinked at it in surprise. When did that happen?

Something growled outside his door, and Harry looked up. On the other side of the corridor one of the dark-winged men was snarling at his door. Needless to say Harry was a bit alarmed. Suddenly the man leapt, bashing himself against his own door. He viciously attacked the bars, clawing and biting and hitting, snarling all the while. He looked up at Harry for a second, and the look in was so intense, his eyes seemed to almost glow. Something about that look gave Harry the distinct impression the man had gone over the edge. Not that his little tantrum hadn't given it away.

"What's he doing?" He asked, fascinated. "What happened to him?"

"What do you mean, 'what's happened to him'? He's Cursed, that's what."

Harry peered through toward his neighbor. It was a futile thing to do as he was hopelessly out of Harry's sight, but he did it anyway.  
"Cursed? By whom?"

The man didn't answer. "Who cursed him?" Harry asked repeated.

"...Dark Eyes, of course."

Harry wanted to slam a door and angrily retreat, but that unfortunately wasn't an option at the moment. "Who is Dark Eyes!"

Silence again.

"Look, I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"... You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes!"

"I am Aadon. Where do you come from, boy?"

"Earth. It's... a place not here."

"As if I didn't know that," he replied sarcastically.

"So you did?" Harry didn't understand his annoyance.

Aadon sighed loudly. "You wouldn't know that, would you. Go on. Tell me what happened."

Harry felt extremely relieved. Somebody, anybody, to finally confide in was an improvement. He told the whole story, starting with when he'd left Hogwarts Castle.

"Huh." he other man thoughtfully when Harry was finished. "I'm not quite sure how you came from Earth either, but I know you must be cursed like us or you wouldn't be in here. I have a theory... but let's start by answering your question - who is Dark Eyes?

"Before this place- which is called Origin- existed, there was a huge Void, and it's not a very nice place. It's cold and windy for many years that is where the six gods lived. Then, they created a large space that kept the void out, and created Origin. On the years that the gods lived on Origin its surface changed to suit their personalities, creating a diverse landscape. The gods were then nameless, I'll refer to them as we've come to know them: The Green Lady, The Hermit God, Mind Ruin, Wrath, Intuition, and Dark Eyes.

"Five of them created their own people to live on Origin, while and the gods themselves moved into the sky above. The sixth god, Intuition, announced she didn't wish to create her own race and disappeared somewhere into Origin. Our god is Dark Eyes, God of Darkness. He created the mountains and caves where we now live. The gods later started creating other bubbles in the void, filled with new worlds. They didn't want the worlds to be isolated in the Void, but there was no way to travel between them. The gods met in the sky over Origin, looking down. They decided to pick a species that would go through the Void itself and create portals for the others. Dark Eye's creations were the obvious choice, as we fly. However we weren't quite suited to withstand the Void. Dark Eyes said he could make a few changes that would fix this problem. He left. Wrath, God of Destruction, followed.

"Dark Eyes selected about a fifth of our men for these changes. Since the Void is windy he made their wings larger, and their bodies extremely durable. For the impenetrable darkness he enhanced their senses and he gave them the ability to pierce the barriers between our worlds and the Void and navigate instinctually through. With a bit of magic two holes could be lined up and patched through to each other through a portal. The Void is also ice cold. So cold it freezes your body instantly and as you are unable to move back, you freeze to death. It only takes a couple minutes."

Harry was a bit unnerved by his detailed description. Aadon's voice suddenly sounded very defeated as he continued, deliberately slow.

"So Dark Eyes and Wrath lit a fire inside their new portal guides which burned unceasingly and always keep them warm. The two gods then returned them to the mountains. When they woke up in the morning, changed, they were marked. Sometime during the night their wings had turned black. It caused quite a stir as nobody knew what had happened to the marked ones but they were suddenly able to do extraordinary things- disappear and reappear somewhere else, break stones clear in half, that kind of thing. Initially they were revered. But... it didn't take the people long to discover that sometimes the fire inside them would grow too hot, and when the heat reached their brain it caused temporary insanity. The insane were filled with rage, reduced to nothing more than animals, yet the changes made rendered them nearly invincible. Their own people called them Cursed. A mistake of the Gods.

"The Hermit God, God of Knowledge had been uneasy with the radical changes, and the two remaining goddesses were skeptical of them as well. When the first death happened, they took notice. They met in the sky for an urgent meeting, but by the end they had only confirmed what they already knew; the fire was necessary. Mind Ruin, Goddess of Beauty, and The Green Lady, Goddess of Peace, hurried off to remedy the situation somewhat. They took a section of the female population and gave them the power to heal, so they could help any wounded. This time when the people woke in the morning and saw more people had been marked, they were terrified, but they soon came to be adored and were called the Gift of the Gods. The society was turned into a system that would enable the Cursed to still create portals, but not give them enough freedom to chance hurting someone. Originally the plan was to find a cure, but they only found ways to subdue the madness slightly. Satisfied with themselves, they stopped looking for a cure and without a second thought drugged the Cursed into oblivion. Millennia later nothing's really changed." There was a long pause.

"Do you understand, boy?"

Harry didn't reply. His mind had gone blank, he stared only at his pitch black wings which he'd curved about himself. By this point he didn't even see them anymore. In a detached voice, Harry faintly replied, "We're Cursed?"

"Yes. The system's flaw is that most of the time the Portal Guides are perfectly normal people. But the moments we experience rage or strong emotions, have terribly consequences. For that we are condemned by a society that is a prison in itself. They need us, but scorn us and leave us buried underground.

"And it's even further twisted because the Healers are hardly as perfect as they are made out to be. They are as psychologically unstable as we are. We have miraculous powers, and both of us live with serious draw backs. They can bring people back from the brink of death and heal limbs that normally would have forever been incapacitated. But when the goddesses created the healers they were in quite a hurry and overdid the "peace" and "nonviolence" their creation stood for. Consequently the healers are small and fragile. Their potential for violence was removed, sacrificing even physically being able to defend themselves. They can't fly for any substantial amount of time. But then again, they don't need to. What happened to them physically only reflects what was done inside. They have a deep-rooted fear of almost everything in the world. They have episodes in which they hide to avoid all people and situations. And people pretend none of it is true... maybe they have come to believe it. Yet our faults are never forgotten and they bash us over the head with reminding us. Every single day."

Harry felt sick. "So we're all here... forever?"

"No, not quite. There are ways they allow us among them. Of the many levels that form the Keep, the closer you get to the surface the more and more the prisons are replaced with comfortable rooms. And that doubles as a symbol of their privilege; those who stay there leave the Keep on different conditions and travel to different worlds creating portals. I used to be one of them. We are in the deepest level of security currently in use, though there are more. I've been in this section, and specifically the more criminally suspect part of the

corridor, for a very long time. You're the first neighbor I've had in years now."

"Why did they put you here?" Harry inquired.

"Because I'm many thousands of years old, as you become older you become more powerful, and they eventually stop letting you out altogether. And there's no one left my age anymore, they've all killed each other off somehow. It appears I'm the odd one out."

"That's horrib- did you say thousands?"

"Yes. Twenty six thousand, to be precise."

Harry digested this. "Why am I here then and not on one of the upper levels?" Instead of replying, Aadon just chuckled. "I went through the portal, and they captured me and beat me up and put me in here, why would they put me here with you?"

Aadon only laughed harder. "Oh they didn't beat you up, Harry." He finally rasped.

"Who did then?" Harry demanded, and Aadon was completely beside himself, bellowing with laughter than echoed through the corridor.

"You've made quite a name for yourself Harry." Aadon said as an explanation, once he had calmed down a bit. "Almost everyone has heard of you."

"Why!"

"Listen closely Harry." Aadon said importantly. "When they attempted to take you into custody you turned on them and attacked them. It's not something you'll remember very well, that's a common effect of the madness. You proceeded to easily beat them all to the ground, and then flew right out of the pit itself, and there wasn't even anybody left to sound the alarm. I'd shake your hand, but...well..."

"What happened next?" Harry wanted to know.

"Well you disappeared for a couple weeks. They searched everywhere, but couldn't find any trace of you. Finally you were spotted by a young girl who returned and able to point the search parties in the direction of your whereabouts. I forget precisely how many of them it took to bring you in. There were quite a few casualties."

"They deserved it," Harry stated, and grinned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, positive. We've heard you'd be coming for days now, it's caused quite a stir. They've dubbed you 'The Wild One'."

Harry was stunned by it all, and finally relieved of having to hear any more, felt the full brunt of it. He somehow slid down the wall onto his back where he stared at the ceiling. My conclusion that this world is insane seems to be very correct. But... am I included? I have a place here; I fit in, although in quite the wrong crowd. And if what Aadon says is true... I don't know what to think about that one. How can I not remember the last couple weeks when so much happened?

Harry started. WEEKS! WEEKS! Oh no... so much for sneaking back into Gryffindor Tower. Harry looked up until he was looking out his cell again, although now upside down. I'm sure Aadon and the others have tried to escape, and if Mr. Crazy over there is still bouncing around his cell it's not like I have a chance. I did escape before though... but then again I'd been outside the Keep and had... gone insane, which played an important factor. It's hopeless!

The cell block had been relatively silent since the distribution of breakfast, other than the commotion made by who Harry had referred to as Mr. Crazy and it had returned so now, besides his occasional growls.

A door somewhere opened, and there were footsteps of people approaching. Those who even cared anymore went to the doors to look out- Harry was not among them. However when the footsteps stopped beside his own door he thought it might be prudent. He looked up to see a large group of men all dressed like his attackers on the first night.

Glad he'd practiced his glare a bit lately, he gave them an eyeful.

"Harry Potter, you have been requested into the presence of the Queen, and will be brought there immediately. Do not try to resist."

Harry suspected either the drugs from last night were still in effect or there had been more in his last meal. No that it even mattered the tiniest bit. He felt very small in front of all of them. Now they obviously worked out. When he'd escaped he'd been crazy-strong, or whatever. Wait didn't Aadon say we're MADE stronger? Harry felt a bit more confident. They opened the cell and Harry stepped out, grateful the bars were closing behind him instead of in front of him, which was only a couple feet of displacement but made quite a difference in his mood.

"Boy!" Harry turned his head to look into Aadon's cell. His neighbor wasn't near as old as he thought he'd look. He barely looked sixty, and a fit sixty at that! His hair was dark, with no touch of gray. Next to Dumbledore he would have looked half the headmaster's age, not twenty-six thousand years old. Harry recalled what freshly escaped Sirius had looked like, and there wasn't even a comparison. Sure he looked a bit haggard and his hair was a bit stringy, but he looked like he could hold his own. His eyes were dark as he gave Harry a serious look. One of the men gave Harry a hard push that almost sent him stumbling, but he was pleased to find that he went nowhere. He looked back at Aadon.

"Live, Harry." He said and there was something starkly honest that shone through his tough exterior. He looked at Harry almost fondly. "Live while you still can."

Harry got a chill down his spine. If I don't escape... what will happen to me?

Aadon turned his back and disappeared out of sight. Harry surrendered to their will and followed the men down the hall. Harry then had time to give thought about where they were headed. The presence of the Queen... I wonder what she wants from me? Maybe she's just going to ogle me, 'The Wild One', and send me back down to my cell. We'll probably be walking quite a while longer, I suspect. I

can't imagine the Queen would be caught dead anywhere near a place like that.

He was right. The trek from the Keep was a very long one. They went up many flights of steps where all with doors were closed though Harry knew that behind them were more 'Cursed' like him. Finally there was a faint green glow ahead, and they emerged out into the fresh air. Looking behind him, Harry saw a cave door similar, if not the same one, that The Golden Lady had almost walked him through. This time Harry knew where the eerie quality came from.

Many of his escorts suddenly leapt into the air and hovered above them, flapping their wings. They looked down at Harry expectantly, and Harry figured that he was supposed to follow. He felt queasy.

This is going to be embarrassing, Harry thought without doubt. Taking a big shaky breath, he flapped his wings once experimentally, pleased to see them respond. Those still on the ground hastily leapt away, and looked at him angrily, hands going to their pockets. I must have done something wrong... better get a move on it! He leapt into the air like the others, and contrary to what'd he'd been expecting, didn't come back down hard. His stomach clenched as he flapped a bit to get to the level of the others and instead shot up fast, but managed to stop just in time. He was then able to hover too, which took only a couple moments of experimentation to get to feel for what would keep him in place.

Harry felt a bit awkward, but exhilarated. Several things come to mind... flying on Buckbeak, who also had great huge flappers that displaced great amounts of air, and the thestral was similar. Neither had the grace of a broom, though. I don't think anything is quite like flying on my broom... but this comes close! Looking down and seeing... nothing at all... yet free and secure. I think it's also special because... the wings are mine.

Above him the people had moved up, and as those below prepared to take wing Harry followed. As they began to travel upward, they formed almost a sphere around him, but Harry was too far gone to care. He cared about nothing but the increasingly greater ease with which he flew through the air.

This is where my family comes from? My father? The man in all those pictures, so normal looking, came from here? If anything my mother was the exotic looking one. Maybe she was from here too though. They said she was one of the Half-people, and since they initially accused me of being one that must mean humans. Which means that there are humans on this world. Harry remembered something that made him smile. The Golden Lady... she'd said that there was no portal established here so I must have meant to go to the Half-people. Which means the humans have a portal! Of course that leaves the matter of escaping, staying sane, finding the humans, and convincing them to let me go through their portal.

Harry considered the matter of the portal again. They can probably give me instructions to go through. There are a lot of what-ifs in that plan. What-if I make it through the portal? Will I show up and term will already have started? What exactly will everybody think when I show up... with wings? Maybe I can go back and get the amulet. Harry gritted his teeth. This is so frustrating. Keep your head, Harry... you can panic, blame yourself, and dwell on things later... now you need to be calmly planning, watching, and gathering information. Which I'm already doing horribly at, so far I've missed everything we've passed completely. At this rate I'll be here forever and end up locked up with Aadon until I die. Wow, that's grim... rewind... forget I thought that.

He looked around purposefully. The walls themselves were dotted with cave openings, and they kept passing large runes or symbols (their writing I suppose) that were charred black and easily visible. All about them the doorways and air were empty, even looking up and down Harry could not find a single soul. Turning his inspection to his escorts, Harry noted that each had a symbol on the side of their thigh, some differing slightly. All were wearing dark blue. The one on Harry's left seemed to be the youngest by far. He didn't look much older than Harry though Harry had misgivings about that; Aadon only looked sixty but was... lets do the math... more than four-hundred times that old.

The one he'd been looking at caught Harry's gaze and looked back at him. All of a sudden, he smiled. Harry's eyes widened. Altogether he hadn't been treated very well since arriving (even Kahd had tricked

him) and Aadon had told him outright that they were shunned. But the guy had smiled, and as Harry watched he also moved a bit closer, which created a large dent in their nice sphere. The one next to him shot him an annoyed glance but nothing as was said or done about it Harry figured it was alright.

“We are allowed to talk to you, you know.” The one near him had followed his gaze. “It’s considered bad form, though. ‘Strong and silent presence’ and whatnot... blah blah blah. However I can’t help myself.” He chuckled. “You are the Wild One. Curiosity, you could call it.”

Harry smiled back, though half was because of the irony. In one world I’m The-Boy-Who-Lived, and in another I go and get another random title. I just can’t live a normal, quiet life, can I? Not sure whether I should be annoyed by the attention... or flattered.

“Who are you, may I ask? Nobody seems to know which family you come from, or if you have a clan.”

“I’m not I...” Brown Hair had said he had a clan. “I don’t know. I’m new here.”

“New!”

“Yeah,” he looked pretty surprised and Harry wasn’t sure what to say. “Where are we going exactly? What do the symbols mean?”

“New... that is sooo dark!” was his only reply.

Harry stared at him blankly. “Dark...”

The guy shrugged. “Sorry. I mean amazing.”

Harry laughed out loud. “I get it. Slang. Yeah we’ve got all kinds of random stuff for slang too... where I come from I have a people say ‘cool’ sometimes.”

The young escort stared blankly just as Harry had done a moment earlier. “Cool? That is... so random.”

"Only as random as dark." Harry pointed out.

The other guy shook his head vehemently. "But it's not random at all! We were created by the God of Darkness, weren't we?"

Harry had to nod. "Okay, not so random. Do you people ..." Harry tried a couple different ways to phrase it in his head. "... worship Dark Eyes?"

The look he gave Harry made him wish he hadn't said anything. "Well he's never asked us to worship him, has he? And I've heard he's talked to the Queen several times. The closest we get to worship would probably be the Queen. That's more of a respect thing though. I mean she is," his eyes shone, "Amazing."

"Queen- respect- important person. Got it. You don't have a King then? Or is this a matriarchy?"

The young escort got quiet and turned away for a moment. "No. No King. The father of each new Queen is usually unknown. It's not a matriarchy; neither men nor women are exclusively in charge. However the ruler always has to be a Queen." His voice was regretful. "With males, there's always the chance that he's born Cursed." He snuck a glance at Harry.

Harry didn't quite feel the sensitivity to this that the escort seemed to think he had, that is not yet, and he was curious. "How... exactly do the Cursed... or should I say why... are some born like us?"

"It runs in families. There really aren't all too many Cursed. Fortunately they- um, you, are many, many times outnumbered by the regular citizens. It's hereditary, but that doesn't mean all males in the family have it. Usually it's the eldest born son, but there's no rule of thumb. Sometimes it skips generations and then shows up later.

"The ruling family is the ruling family for a reason. They seem to have been chosen, perhaps by Dark Eyes himself. They are very powerful and have visions sent by him, he counsels them. They are given the highest education and are basically groomed from birth. So you don't

much have a choice who becomes the next ruler, and at any time the royal family could be infected with the curse." He realized what he'd just said. "Sorry."

"Go on!" Harry urged and the escort relaxed a bit. What exactly does he think I'm going to do to him?

"Anyway in the end it got confusing and there was an official decision that ruler would always be a Queen. Strangely enough ever since all Queens have only ever given birth to daughters. We suspect Dark Eye had a hand in that as well. So whoever the father of the next ruler is, it doesn't even matter if some great-great-uncle was cursed, the Queen can choose whoever she wants. And there's no chance the heir to the throne is born Cursed, because they will always be female. And females can't be Cursed."

"So does the Queen have an heir?"

The escort shrugged. "Well, you seem to have hit on a bit of a mystery. Everybody is pretty sure she does, but we don't know much more than that. She's definitely old enough, though no-where near old enough to even consider retiring so nobody worries about it. I think some of the older people know more than they're saying, it's a bit puzzling. Since the elders don't seem to care about it, I'm guessing this kind of thing always kept silent. For safety, maybe?" He didn't sound too sure.

It seemed to Harry that they were going very wings felt cramped, he just wanted to shake them out actually move them, the pace was agitating. He felt like he'd been sitting in History of Magic class for way too long, his muscles were tense and shaking -not out of exhaustion but out of a need for exercise- even though he was flying.

"The symbols?" Harry repeated tiredly.

The escort glanced at the wall as they passed one. He looked pleased. "Look, we're almost there! The symbols are landmarks. They orient you from anywhere in the Pit. We're nearing the Queen's level. The levels- well I might as well give you a run through. We started down at the bottom where the Cursed are, then a level of

security for them, then comes the Academy. Above the Academy are many random levels, couldn't really tell you much about them. Records, artifacts, and whatnot. Then come the worker's rooms. The workers are a diverse bunch. Basically anybody who makes or builds things goes into that category. Those levels are the ones where the workers actually go to... do their stuff. As you can tell I don't really know much about them, I live at the Academy.

"The level we are currently passing is for everyone who works directly for the Queen, so that they can be directly on call when she needs them. The Queen's levels are obviously next, starting with a few personal levels, then the Queen's Hall, where we are now headed. Above that doesn't concern you. Just her advisors, then the offices and laboratories for the Educated. When the Educated get old they teach Studies in the next level up. After that it's civilians all the way to the top, starting with clans. The Queen's Hall is pretty much centered halfway down the pit."

"What's the difference between Studies and the Academy?" Harry asked.

"Everybody does Studies. It just teaches you basic knowledge, some history with lots of attention to the Gods, and bits and pieces about the world outside the pit like geography and the five races. So when you're done with Studies any number of things might happen. If you're deemed uninteresting, you just go home and have kids, ect. If you're skilled at something, you get sent to the workers, or if you are really intelligent go to the Educated. In both cases you train among the people you're sent to and then become one yourself. In Studies there's also always man who sometimes hangs around and watches, and when everybody's future is being decided he steps forward and chooses several out of the bunch. He has the highest authority and can take pretty much anybody he wants, even those who are to be sent to the Educated or the workers. The ones he picks are then sent to the Academy. And the Academy is apparently a story for another day, because we're here."

Up ahead an extremely large cave opening came into view. It was ten times as big as the others and extremely wide, with a huge ledge. Harry saw other people for the first time on their trip, as some walked

either purposefully into the cave, or came out and flew away. They landed on the ledge and started in. Harry leaned over to quietly speak with his new friend. “What about the Healers?”

“Fewer options, they go to Studies but then either go home, or go to work for the Queen.”

One of the others then turned around and gave them a good glare for talking. Harry glared right back. The man had an odd expression on his face for a moment and then turned back. Harry’s friend had his hand over his mouth to hold in his laughter. Very quietly he whispered so that none but Harry could hear him. “That old lump must have forgotten for a second we weren’t two trainees at the Academy, because he really has no say over what we do. Well... not much anyway.” The way he was walking close to Harry when before he’d kept a bit of distance showed that he’d gotten over his fear and had pretty much put Harry’s differences out of his mind. Harry appreciated it. The young escort was still whispering conspiratorially. “He’s sort of dim, that one, if you know what I mean. Thinks—”

Harry cut him off. “—sorry, but what’s happening next what am I supposed to do?”

“Well we enter the Queen’s Hall, which is full of clanspeople, advisors, a couple Educated—”

Harry interrupted again. “What are the clans?”

“Large families of mages, basically, there aren’t very many of them. After studies they are exempt from everything, even the Academy. They go home and get instruction in magic, something nobody else has access to. Whereas the common people rarely come down to this level, the clanspeople tend to congregate in the Hall.” He didn’t look like he knew what to think about them. “They obviously have a seat of power over all the common people, but none of them seem to use it whatsoever.” He shrugged, and then rolled his eyes. “Anyways as I was saying, you go in the hall and walk to the middle, you’ll be announced, then you bow to the Queen and wait to be told what to do. I can’t help you any more on that, sorry.”

Meanwhile they'd walked in a bit of a curve and up ahead was the brightest light Harry had seen since arriving at Hogwarts. Since night fell that day Harry had been in almost complete darkness. The Pit had its glow, and the Keep had many torches, but this was bright, true light. In front of them their tunnel, which was very big already, widened.

The young escort grabbed Harry's hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you, Oh Great-and-mighty Wild One." He said with a grin.

Harry grinned back with a bit of regret, as he was about to part with the only friendly face out of the whole bunch. They walked out of the tunnel into a long room. It was smaller than the Great Hall at Hogwarts, but still impressive. A great number of people were scattered all about talking amongst themselves, but a definite pathway that was raised a couple inches off the floor parted them down the middle where wound through the Hall. They walked through the crowd, and the pathway widened into a huge circle that faced a great many people seated in chairs. All of whom were all centered around a dais on which was what was definitely a throne, even though made of solid stone. To compensate for the stone it was decked with furs. Many small shiny pillows in every color were stacked everywhere and spilled down around the throne itself, which was big enough for the Queen to comfortably sprawl, leaning against one oversize armrest with one leg tucked into her seat and the other hanging off the edge. She didn't sit as Harry expected a Queen on a throne would sit, and looked fairly pleased with herself as she fanned herself with the tip of a wing.

"The Wild One, Queen Aeyris!" All around the room there was a stir as people ceased to talk and turned to peer at him curiously.

From the dais, The Golden Lady looked down at him. Seeing him look back, she gave a half smile. From Harry's side his friend was whispering furiously.

"Bow- I said bow!"

## Chapter Five: Enna

The Third Queen of Dark Eye's people sat in her chamber in deep concentration. Eyes closed she tilted her face skyward. "Dark Eyes, please hear me. I need help." She held her breath as she waited to see if there would be a reply. Hearing nothing, she sighed and decided to go to bed.

But when she opened her eyes, it wasn't her bed she saw before her. She was still seated in her room, she could feel her chair below her as she gripped it tightly with her hands, and the warmth of the fires in her room, but they were nowhere to be seen. She was suspended in the sky, Origin miles and miles below her. The trees were nothing but dots and the rivers wound like threads among them. She looked up.

Before her was a man, standing casually as if not in the sky at all. His long cloak was not touched by any ripple of wind and some tendrils of black hair lay motionless on his shoulders. His hood was casting his face in shadow, most of it was mysteriously obscured. True to his name, his striking eyes looked out at her calmly, nothing but dark pools of black.

Something moved in her peripheral vision, and the Queen whipped her head around. A woman stood to her right, a fitting green dress shone beautifully around her torso and thighs, and her bare feet stood on nothing but air. Her hair was a warm brown and curled about her face and down her shoulders. At Queen Aseea's glance she smiled. Aseea could not help but smile back at this friendly face. She turned her head around to look behind her and to her left, and sure enough a circle of men and women enclosed her.

On Dark Eye's other side was Mind Ruin, wearing a flowing purple dress that folded around her feet as if she were standing on solid ground. The sleeves were long and sweeping, and slightly reddish gold locks of hair were thick down to her waist. Her face however was draped with many white veils, and although she couldn't see her face Aseea thought this woman was kindly as well and smiled at her too. Mind Ruin's beauty was so incredible that any mortal who looked upon her face would go mad. The Hermit God, who had a spot next

to the Green Lady, had a long silver robe and unkempt hair, but it was Intuition standing next to him who made her pause. In complete opposite of Dark Eyes, her eyes were entirely white with no pupils. Her hair was straight and white as well, almost as long as Mind Ruin's. Mind Ruin's hair sparkled, but Intuition's was as blank as parchment. Her face was very pale as well; nearly the same white as her cloak, fastened shut with what looked like many small bones.

Aseea peered timidly at the man on the other side of Mind Ruin. He was shorter than Dark Eyes but stocky. This must be Wrath, she thought. He was dressed in heavy red armor. Although Aseea was quite struck by his heavily muscled physique, she was a bit frightened of him and turned back to Dark Eyes. While he was just as intimidating with his iris-less eyes, at least he was her God, and he had heard her and fulfilled her request after all.

"Thank you." She said softly.

"What brings you to me, child?" At his voice Aseea relaxed considerably. He didn't sound coldhearted at all, his voice was low and calm.

"It concerns the Cursed Ones." She said slowly, not sure if this was a sensitive topic. He didn't react in any way. "We have devised ways to contain them, we found a plant in Aya's Forest—" She nodded at Aya, the Green Lady, who briefly smiled again. "- that when pressed the resulting liquid, ingested, makes one quite docile. However any room we try to keep them in becomes completely torn apart when they have a fit. Walls are knocked down, doors simply shattered. There have been resulting deaths, and several Cursed ones have simply disappeared, ported away right in front of our eyes. Then, sometimes, they attack each other!" she said wildly, "And just make a huge mess and kill each other and often others in the process. We are all frightened, the Cursed can't control themselves, and we have simply no defense against them. There will be more escaping into Origin soon."

Dark Eyes watched her from under his hood, and then gave a small nod, the first sign of movement she'd seen from him. "Thank you for coming to us with your concerns. I will take care of everything."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Years of worrying and premature wrinkles were erased from her face.

"I will instate a new reality around the mountain. Everything inside the Pit is protected. No part of the mountain itself can be broken. Existing caves, doors and bars are now invincible to any attack on them. And between the walls of the mountain porting will not be possible."

"I'm very grateful, Creator." He gave another nod and the scene started dissolving. "Green Lady!" she cried out.

Everything solidified again, the Gods eyes fixed upon her. She shivered. "Green Lady?" She asked timidly. "Could I speak with you a moment?"

"Yes dear." Her voice was like a whisper of wind.

"I am now pregnant. Like the Queens before me, we worry about our children. If one of them were born Cursed, it would be a disaster. If it doesn't happen to me, it is bound to happen in the future. Is there anything... you could do?"

The Green Lady left her spot in the circle of six to walk up to Aseea. Reaching out, she actually touched Aseea's cheek.

"You have nothing to fear, you have a daughter. From her on, no sons will be born into your line. Daughters will inherit the throne." The Green Lady gave a mischievous glance toward Dark Eyes, but he made no sign of an opinion either way on the matter. She then winked at Aseea, and suddenly they were all gone.

Millennia later, the descended of Aseea, Queen Aeyris, stood in the Pit, pulling her cloak tightly around her against the chill of the mist. She bit her lip impatiently, but underneath her calm exterior she was anxious and bewildered. There had been a knock on the door that night, waking her up from her sleep. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she had stared at the door in amazement, and quickly hurried to answer it. Only something serious would bring someone to wake her up in the middle of the night.

Opening it up, it was her favorite bodyguard from her childhood and now, in his advancing age, Chief of Security. He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "Sorry Aeyris," Natan had said with familiarity. "These two insisted on seeing you immediately, they assured me they would accept all blame and punishment if you are woken unnecessarily."

She looked beyond him. A young woman with dark hair gave a wry smile, her hand threaded through the arm of the much taller man beside her. He was having trouble looking Aeyris in the eyes.

The dark haired woman had no such qualms, and Aeyris recognized her as one of the clanspeople.

There had been gossip surrounding her, she had decided to marry outside the clanspeople to much older Educated. She was a known genius when it came to magic. "I apologize, my Queen, it was urgent." She uncovered something she'd been holding underneath her cloak, it was a large sphere of clear rock glowing vivid red.

"I've been researching portals, spending much time up on top of the mountain at the Porting Point. I created this while there. I could accurately determine when new portals were created nearby." She gave the Queen a look of latent meaning. "It's been activated." She waited expectantly. "A portal is opening! Here! Now!"

"You know that's impossible."

"But it's happening anyway! I'm determined that it will open down at the bottom of the Pit."

Aeyris looked at her speculatively. "How?"

"I really don't know. But I'm positive."

The Queen waved them off and closed the door, hurrying to get dressed. She told Natan to send people to the bottom of the Pit immediately.

But now that she was there, there was no one to be seen. She stood completely alone, and was getting worried. As she tugged at her cloak again, something appeared in the mist before her. She stifled a gasp. It was true...

Aeyris wasn't sure whether to leave immediately before he saw her, or to go closer. Dark Eyes, Security better be here soon! She walked forward a few steps and waited.

He whipped his head around and stared at her, an extremely shocked expression on his face. Their eyes met. Green eyes... very uncommon. And he's... really young.

"How did you come to be here?" she asked.

"Um... I accidentally went through a portal and here I am."

"Impossible." Aeyris felt a chill up her spine. Who was he? How did he get around a law of reality that Dark Eyes himself had set up? Unless Dark Eyes let this one through. What reason would he have to do this? She considered. We better keep him secure for now. "There is no portal established here." She watched him, not sure what to say, if she should explain or not. "I'll take you with me for now." She finally decided. Several seconds later she got quite a shock as the boy jerked like he'd been stabbed. She turned around to peer at him curiously.

"Aarghah! You have WINGS!"

"I am quite aware." She was now extremely confused. If he's a Cursed... or is he? she thought. He must be. But why doesn't he have wings? What is going on here?

"And you apparently do not, therefore I assume the portal you were meaning to take was supposed to take you to the City of the Half-people. How you ended up here is far, far beyond me." She was still unsure whether he was Cursed — or Half-person. In which case he must have gone through an established portal that malfunctioned and sent him here... but how could that have happened?

All of the races on Origin were differing, but they each were built on the same basic construction. The Mer-people had the same upper body as the Centaurs. The Bloodbeasts were built on the same frame. As were the Silents and the Vineadryads, the two had the closest similarity in appearance. But the Half-people were nothing but a blank slate, just the beginning of a form. They had no race of their own. They were only half of a person, they had arms, legs, a head, and a torso, but nothing more. No scales, no claws and fur, no wings, no hooves.. nothing. There was quite a few of them, they lived all over Origin. There was a large City of them nearby that lived by the sea.

"Half-people? That doesn't sound good, I don't like I'd like to go to a city of Half-people..."

She led him toward the Keep of the Cursed carefully, watching for her backup and making conversation. He must be Half-person then. He has no idea what's going on, he doesn't look much like a Silent, he has green eyes for Darkness sake. Poor creature, I wonder why he was sent here.

She was going to lead him into the Keep, but after coming to this conclusion she didn't think she should bring him in there anymore. Unsure of what to do next, she stopped at the doorway.

"I just want to go home." He said.

Suddenly Aeyris spotted something, something incredible. "You ARE home." She said with wonder.

"What?" He suddenly appeared distracted, but she couldn't hear anything. His eyes searched the mist and he was barely paying attention to her. What did he hear that she could not? "In what way do you mean?"

"I had my suspicions before, when you appeared, but now I am sure. Tell me- what's that around your neck?" Her thoughts were grim. He is Cursed after all. It's an amulet of disguise, one that can make you look like any other creature. In this case a Half-person. Everything has changed- I may be in danger. What if he gets confused and

angry and kills me? Come on Natan, don't leave me here all alone! He wasn't known to let her down.

"I wasn't wearing that before I went into the portal!" he said finally.

Aeyris ignored this comment. It was too far beyond her for her to focus on it. "Nevertheless it is around your neck."

"Who are you? You know what's going on, don't you, and you're not telling me." he said, eying her with suspicion.

"Indeed I have solved the mystery you represent." Then she heard it too. Footsteps in the mist. Her backup had arrived. She whistled so they knew her position, and they came running.

"Who did you call?" He demanded. His eyes shifted left and right, and he fumbled with his pockets.

"There is no where to run, Cursed. We are not on level ground; we are in fact in a deep, deep pit. No way in or out, unless you fly. Not even the sun reaches us." She pretended to be calm and confident. Odd, a Silent who doesn't know his own homeland. "Do you know anything about your people, your heritage?" She tried to distract him. Also she was curious how he grew up not aware of who, or what he was.

"No. I... I don't know." He picked up the stone on the amulet around his neck, and held it up. "Does this mean something?"

"It's one of ours." Rather well made, as well.

"Well, your people aren't very artistically inclined, are you?" he said cuttingly. He was suddenly extremely agitated.

"It wasn't intended as such." He tugged on the chain.. "NO! Don't take it off!" She cried. Please leave it on, let him leave it on...

"If it's one of yours, then keep it. I want to go home. Stop being so damn evasive, are you going to help me or not!" Aeyris stared simply

down at the amulet at her feet where he had thrown it. He was suddenly furious. What did I do wrong? She wondered miserably.

Then they came. Late, but right before things got out of hand. The Cursed made a run for it, and she watched as they converged on him. They held onto him from all sides, holding tightly as he fought them. Suddenly he slumped. Pitch black wings unfolded from his back, flopping limply toward the ground. Aeyris was not comfortable with this, but at least they had him out.

Suddenly two or three of the men holding on to him were yelling. Aeyris was extremely alarmed. What was wrong? They dropped him and backed off, and from where she was standing she could see the skin on their hands burnt red and blistering.

The wings suddenly flapped once, catching air like unfurled sails. It took only one shake from the Cursed to dislodge the rest of the security, who all backed off shaking their hands, some were smoking. The Cursed looked around at them all. His green eyes were transformed into pits of anger, and glowed with a low flickering light.

He set upon them. Several sweeps of his sharp edge feathered wings almost sent heads rolling, others were crushed with blows, and he spun around in a blur. It was over within a minute.

Aeyris was then sure it was the end for her. He would turn on her next, and there was no backup left, no protective spells, no way to defend herself. Who will rule once I'm gone? There wasn't enough time...

It took her a moment to realize the Cursed had not come for her. In the contrary, he had disappeared. Looking upward, she could see him drifting upward through the mist, at a pace she could never hope to match. Not that she planned to chase him, of course. I'm staying right here. Not moving one inch. Who knows where he's headed? A splatter of blood had almost reached her shoe, and she held in a whimper, squeezing her eyes shut. Queens aren't supposed to whimper.

Harry didn't bow. He glared up at her, feeling somewhat betrayed. She could have told me she was Queen, that's a bit of an important detail.

The Golden Lady, 'Aeyris', pointed at a chair placed on the raised platform. Several of the people looked a bit scandalized, but it was rather secluded and out of the way so nothing was said, they just gave him annoyed looks.

Confused, Harry sat down, and the escort all gathered some ways behind him, close but against the far wall, almost invisible. Harry looked around inquisitively. Many eyes were on him, but as time passed they started to forget about him and he was ignored. Harry leaned on an armrest, chin in hand. He hadn't had his glasses since waking up after his escape, but hadn't had time to give them any thought. After everything else, he couldn't imagine what could still surprise him.

And there he sat all day. At first it was interesting, there were several more announced visitors who would report to her and leave again. The Queen and her people on the platform held a loud discussion, and the crowd listened, occasionally calling out to them. Harry however had no clue what they were talking about at all, it was all gibberish to him, so soon he was bored out of his mind. Why is she even having me here? What's the point of me sitting here in this damn chair for hours? Harry's eyes drifted shut, and the crowd murmured from somewhere far away as he lingered on the edge of sleep.

A great stirring woke him back up. The crowd had all stepped backward several feet, and stood at attention. The Queen stood from her throne and left the room through a door on her left. Only when she was out of sight did the rest of the crowd move, many left in groups but there were still quite a few who lingered, talking. Someone walked up to his side, and he turned to see a gruff looking man he hadn't noticed before gesture for Harry to follow. Harry stood and the escorts were not far behind.

"I'm Natan, Chief of Security. Don't try any funny stuff. I assure you I have no mercy for anyone who tries to hurt the Queen." He said, his back to Harry, but his voice was stony.

"Point taken."

At the door Natan held up a hand to stop Harry's escorts. "You will stay here."

Harry followed him through the door the Queen had vanished through. Finally something's happening.

Queen Aeyris waited on the other side, leaning against a far wall in a very familiar way.

"You didn't tell me you were Queen." He said darkly.

"Well the opportunity to tell you didn't quite arise." She said sarcastically. "You were too busy slaughtering my men."

"... slaughtering?" Harry repeated uncertainly. He felt a bit hot and uncomfortable. Slaughtering?

"Nevermind that." She continued. "I must be crazy bringing you around again, after that stunt you pulled. However... it was rather impressive. So tell me, do we send you back to the Keep or are you willing to work with us?"

"The second one."

"Good. Not a promised job, but we'll see how it goes." She hesitated, looking at him. Harry could almost feel her unease, and he got even more depressed if that was possible.

She turned and with a swish of skirts exited the room and they followed. They traveled through an adjoining, large room that looked like it was for meetings, into a hallway past several that looked more like offices. Then they arrived at stairs, and descended them. They walked for several minutes through several more halls and doorways, each of which were well guarded.

"These are my quarters." She explained as they wandered through.

This place is huge, Harry thought, It never ends!

Aeyris motioned toward a closed door, elaborately carved and decorated. She and Natan dropped back, and looked toward a bench some ways away. Before turning away she nodded at the floor. Harry was surprised to see the entire length of the hallway on either side was lined with rows of small rocks. They were piled everywhere.

The Queen saw him looking. "Those rocks hold strongest protection spells we could find, on each and every one. They have accumulated over many millennia. That's why you didn't need your security..."

"So you can't pull off anything here, either." Natan added emphatically. Harry had the distinct feeling the Chief of Security really, really didn't like him. Sure enough as he turned away, Natan muttered to Aeyris, "Nothing but trouble since he showed up," and Harry thought he saw her nod slightly.

"Just go through that door. And be nice!" She pointed at the door..

Feeling lost and rather small in their world, Harry pushed though the door. The room beyond was very pleasant. It was large, with doors on all other three walls. It was comfy and luxuriously decorated, Harry was impressed.

"Not another one!" Someone exclaimed loudly. Harry almost jumped, and spun around to see a girl leaning against the wall on the side of the door he'd entered through. She had a hurt, vulnerable look in her eyes, as if she was offended that he had walked through her door.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked.

"She just doesn't give up, does she?" The girl muttered, ignoring him.  
"You might as well leave."

He just stared. She was also very, very strikingly pretty. "Who are you?"

"You hear me! I said shoo. I don't want you here." She insisted, but then as he turned to leave she held up a hand. "Wait, what did you say?"

"I asked who you were."

She stared at him, obviously stunned. "But... did my mother send you in here?"

"Your mother?"

She gaped. "Yes... Queen Aeyris."

"In that case, yes. Yes she did." Harry said, standing dumbly. Um... what am I supposed to do now?

"But you don't know who I am? She said nothing?"

A Princess then. Harry shook his head, and watched her with interest.

Her face brightened as she returned the look. "That's odd- why don't you have a seat."

Harry didn't move, he was too busy staring. She had obvious similarities with her mother, but overall her colors were lighter. Lighter skin tone, pale blond hair, not golden. Something else caught his attention.

"You're a Healer?" He asked as she fluttered her small white wings. She didn't react.

"Are you sitting or not?" She pointed toward several plushy chairs that surrounded a low wood table. He sank down in one, and was tempted to just close his eyes and nap a bit, it was the most comfortable thing he'd sat in for quite some time. She dropped down across from him.

Harry's thoughts returned to the situation at hand. "Since I'm obviously being left out of the loop here, would you care to fill me in?"

He asked. "Who are you and what did your mother send me here for, anyway?"

"My name is Enna." She said, looking a bit surprised. "I don't usually leave my quarters; I don't trust any of these... weird people. My mother keeps sending in various Cursed, she says a regular bodyguard wouldn't suffice. But I don't trust them either."

"Oh." A bodyguard? I guess that's the job she was talking about. It doesn't sound too bad. Though I wonder what kind of bodyguard I would make, anyway? He felt the impulse to test his strength on something, but now was obviously not the time.

She was watching him. "Well. You're rather different. You look closer to my age; usually they're a lot older. Not to mention creepy." Her mouth twisted into a small amused smile.

He relaxed a bit, but sunk into his chair further. It looks like this place might not be completely hopeless. She seems nice too.

"... I wonder why?" She thought aloud, eyebrows drawn together.

"I'm the Wild One." He said knowledgably.

"The what?" She asked with a blank expression on her face.

"The... nevermind." He grinned at her. "A title they gave me." He evaluated her expression. "Um..." he said, embarrassed, "I do hope this... works out or whatever it's supposed to do. If not, they're going to send me back to the Keep." He cringed.

"What's it like, the Keep?"

"Oh it's awful. Nothing like this..." he explained. "It's dark, and hard to breathe, and there's barely any furniture." He didn't add anything about the prison cells and the inmates themselves, she seemed to be very sheltered.

"I wouldn't like that."

"Me neither." He agreed. They sat quietly for a moment.

Harry felt a quiet kinship. Both of them looked as if they just wanted to just disappear and not be there, and seemed unsure of what to say. She was biting her lip so he just tilted his head and pulled a funny face, smiling slightly and she breathed a quiet laugh.

The door opened, and the Queen leaned in. "Enna?" She called. Seeing them, she beckoned to Harry, and he got to his feet reluctantly.

Enna looked grumpy. She waved at Harry, he waved back before walking through the door and suddenly Natan was ushering him down the hall.

Harry had questions but the way they ignored him and starting talking was a good indication they weren't open to any. He stared at the rocks on the floor as they passed. He didn't see anything special about them.

They retraced their steps back to the Queen's Hall, where the escort still waited. The Queen left them there and the rest of them continued through the tunnel to the outside, onto the ledge. Again, wordlessly they leapt off the edge and Harry followed confidently. They traveled down this time.

His friend from earlier appeared beside him. "Wild One."

"Harry."

"... Harry?"

"That's my name."

"Oh. I'm Jon. You didn't listen to me."

"Yeah. I don't think she cared though. I knew her from before, only she hadn't told me she was Queen so I was a little surprised." Harry shrugged.

"You've met? Dark. So what happened?" Jon asked hurriedly. "Where did you go?"

"I think I'm going to be a bodyguard." Harry gathered that Enna's Healer status as well as her existence itself was kept fairly quiet, so he didn't volunteer any more information. "How does that work anyway? What do I have to do as a bodyguard, and how am I supposed to be a bodyguard if I need to be watched myself?"

Jon shrugged, as well as one could while using ones shoulders to fly anyways. "The formal name is Guardian. They protect people, places, things... Cursed are better at that kind of thing. Almost nothing can get past them." He smacked himself on the head, remembering who he was talking to. "You, that is. And there would be people around in case you have... issues."

"We're not returning to the Keep, are we?" Harry asked anxiously, peering down into the darkness below them. They were passing symbol after symbol. Harry was reminded of a huge elevator, which seemed funny for a second, but Harry couldn't bring himself to smile.

"Nah. Several levels above, nearer to the Academy."

"That's good... right? What is there?"

"I suppose it is. I don't know, I've never been inside."

"I would think anything is better than the Keep, but I might still be surprised." Harry doubted it.

Those below them entered single file into a cave doorway, and Harry was pushed through from behind. The room was plain and filled with several tables and chairs were people sat. Several approached them.

"We'll take over from here." They assured his escort, and they headed for the door. Jon glanced back, but instead of following, he slunk to the side and leaned against the wall. The others looked at him for a couple seconds, but left without comment.

Harry was grateful not to be alone; all eyes in the room were on him. Someone pulled him by the arm through a door into a back room. Harry kept his eyes mostly on the floor, avoiding eye contact. Jon followed, studying his surroundings. "I'm more interested in what's going on than you are yourself..." He joked.

A woman sat in the next room over, in a room filled with cubbyholes in the wall in which stacks of paper were neatly organized. She motioned disinterestedly toward a chair in the corner. There was only one but Jon leaned against the wall so Harry took it. Harry wanted to talk to him but there was a heavy silence, he gave Jon a questioning look instead, who just shrugged.

"So you're allowed to just wander around wherever you want?" Harry finally ventured, and the woman's eyes flashed up at them once but then she ignored them.

Jon grinned widely. "Not exactly..." Harry didn't bother to ask, just raised an eyebrow. "Well my name is here on my sleeve, see?" Harry nodded. "Remember Chief Natan?" Harry nodded again. "He's my grandfather. So I just kind of do what I want. I'm sure he wouldn't approve, but no one ever says anything, assuming I have full access to the Pit."

"Your... grandfather?" Harry tried to see the resemblance, but couldn't quite draw a connection between the smiling boy next to him and the glaring, grey haired man. "I think he hates me."

"You killed some of his men, remember?"

"Yeah about that..." he started casually, then added, "I killed them?"

"Yeah..." Jon sounded a bit sarcastic, but didn't say anything further on the topic. "Look. Maybe that's what they're waiting for."

Harry looked up, a man breezed in with several feathers floating around him; he'd obviously just arrived. He handed the woman a thin folder, and she flipped through its pages. "Harry Potter..." She murmured, scribbling a bit with a feather quill, which Harry found a bit amusing. It looked to be one of hers. She pulled out a small cup and

emptied a vial inside it. The liquid was black, and as she stepped over to hand it to him, a thin stream of smoke trailed behind it. She then returned to her desk, watching.

"What?" He asked, peering into it. Jon wrinkled his nose. "I really don't want to take anything."

"Drink it." She ordered. "Drink it all. Trust me, it will be very unpleasant if you don't."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. Before Hogwarts and Madam Pomfrey, Harry had gone to the muggle Doctor several times with the Dursleys, but only as few times as they could get away with without the school complaining. Her demeanor and the room itself reminded him of the doctor's office.

He sniffed at the cup. It smelled slightly odd, so he hesitated and glanced over at Jon, who was also staring intently. Harry tried not to think about knowingly poisoning or drugging himself, quickly swallowed it.

"What does it taste like?" Jon asked. "Feel anything yet?"

Harry shook his head. "It tastes... rather minty."

"Like what?"

"Mint. It's a plant."

"Oh." They sat in silence for a few moments. Harry looked idly around the room, but then it was as if someone had put a hand on his chest and firmly pushed him back against the wall. He closed his eyes, thinking he might yawn. Jon caught him as he fell forward, and propped him back against the wall with a chuckle. "Bye, Harry."

"You can go now." The woman said, shuffling papers again.

"He'll be alright, then?"

He must have received a pretty interesting look as a response, because he got to his feet.

“Nevermind... I’ll be leaving now.” His footsteps faded.

Voices were coming to Harry, far away as if through static from a wrongly tuned radio station. He blinked his eyes open for a second. He was in a different room, but it was all blurred so he squeezed them shut. Suddenly somebody grabbed him, picking him up and slinging Harry over their shoulder.

From somewhere nearby, a woman, possibly the same one as before, was pissed off. “Hey! You can’t just take him! Just who do you think you are?”

## Chapter Six: Fire versus Ice Part One

Harry was set on his feet, and looking down he had a moment of panic where he thought he was about to tumble off a great cliff. He stood quietly with his eyes half shut, remembering that even if he did, it wouldn't matter, he could fly. He didn't need to be afraid of heights, ever. Not that he had been before. Quidditch proved that.

"Can you fly?" a new voice asked and Harry shrugged. With a sigh this person grabbed Harry around his chest under his arms and stepped smoothly off the ledge. They flew up, higher and higher until the sound of one pair of wings multiplied into many, and Harry looked around again to see there were other people flying busily up and down around them. This was the first time Harry had experienced this, usually it was dead silent when flying through the Pit. Finally Harry was set down on another ledge, and his mind cleared a bit.

"Who are you?" he asked, bewildered.

The person next to him looked amused. He didn't look much older than Harry, he had very dark eyes and wings dappled with shades of gray. He looked a little familiar.

"My name is Gray." He smiled. "Come on in." Gray turned and walked a couple steps to the entrance of a small tunnel entrance. He stopped there and looked behind him to see what Harry was doing. Harry followed, though a bit unsteadily. He wanted Gray to explain more but the taller boy walked too far ahead of him. Walking into the tunnel Harry realized he was following wherever his kidnapper led him, but on second thought, They're all strangers here. What's the difference between kidnapper and rescuer?

It was a rather long tunnel. A minute passed before Gray was silhouetted by a light ahead. Harry walked out of the tunnel, squinting against the light to look around the room. It was possibly the most welcoming place he'd been to so far. The holding cell had been horrendously uncomfortable, his new cell was not much better, and although Enna's room was luxurious, it was a too much so for Harry. But this room, which was definitely a living room, had comfy-looking sofas, low tables, and shelves with all manner of things, some of which were spilled off onto the floor or shoved into corners.

"You can sit here!" Gray said, pushing Harry on one of the sofas, and then stepping back. He looked very smug.

"Why did you bring me here?" Harry asked. Gray slumped down next to him, wings folded to one side.

"Because those people are all idiots." Gray said. "I felt responsibility to look out for you... you're my cousin. My name is Gray Raschadin."

Harry opened his mouth to say something, though he wasn't sure what it would be yet. Instead he had a sudden coughing fit, and the mint taste of the black potion burnt in the back of his throat. Catching his breath, he looked down to see the arm rest was on fire. A couple seconds later, the fire was gone. He peered closer. It was a little charred but not much. "Did I just imagine that?"

"No. You lit a fire, but I put it out," Gray leaned on his elbow casually. "We're all used to that kind of thing."

"... I don't understand." Harry felt stupid.

"Wrath's fire. Wrath, God of Destruction, created it when helping Dark Eyes make the Cursed. You coughed some up but I know a spell that extinguishes fire."

"So Dark Eyes and Wrath lit a fire inside their new portal guides which burned unceasingly..." Aadon's voice swam though Harry's head.

Then Dumbledore's. "A place entirely different from our own, therefore a cornucopia of fascinating things we have never encountered before. A new landscape, new applications for magic, and a society entirely unique from us..."

"So... how did you do the spell? Where I come from you need a wand." Harry asked. New applications of magic!

"I know. We've got several of those lying around. We don't need one though, we use these." Gray reached into the front of his thick long sleeved shirt and pulled out another amulet.

Harry leaned forward too look at it closely. The amulet that had disguised him was plain and rough looking, but this was something else entirely. The chain was long, elegant and much thinner, and from it spun a few delicate tendrils clasping around the top of an oval stone. Harry wasn't sure of the metal, it looked a lot like gold but there were variations in its color. The stone was about the length of his thumb, and half that much wide as well as pretty flat. The surface was as smooth as marble and a speckled blue.

"That's beautiful." Harry said, impressed.

"It's called a casting stone. Does pretty much the same thing, but more convenient." Gray tucked it back in.

"So..." Harry shifted uneasily. "You're my cousin..."

"That's right."

"How did you know I was here? And how did you find me and get me away from them?" Harry was amazed.

"We were notified at some point. I think it was once you'd escaped, and rumors of the 'Wild One' were everywhere, everybody kept asking what your identity was but didn't get any answers. One of the Educated showed up to tell us that it was James' son. We were more than a bit surprised, everyone thought you were dead."

"I've been with my mother's sister. I don't like her or her family very much at all. And I didn't know anything about Origin, not even its existence... or these!" Harry shrugged his shoulders to indicate what he was referring to.

"We thought that might be the case, since you were very little when they died. And my mother said your parents never mentioned any of that while on... where was it?" Gray wrinkled his brow. "Oh yes, of course. Earth."

"So I do have family here after all. How many of you?" Harry felt like bursting out with excited laughter, but contained himself and gave a small smile, biting the inside of his lip.

"Right. Hold on, they're sleeping." Gray got too his feet and went back to the door they entered through. Lightly he touched a large slash mark on the wall next to it, and it disappeared, flat stone wall seamlessly replacing where it once was. Harry looked around and saw two, possibly three more of these marks around the room.

"That is so awesome." Harry said. He liked Gray already. Gray had a very blank, calm expression on his face most of the time, which didn't betray anything he was thinking. He spoke rather seriously, and thoughtfully rubbed his chin often. This all reminded Harry a bit of Hermione when she was in intently listening to something. So it was rather surprising when he would suddenly break into a smile or look amused, showing more than just casual calm.

Harry couldn't help but be awed. His cousin had walked right in and taken off with him, in front of everyone there. No wonder he had looked familiar. Their resemblance wasn't strong, but still there. He even had messy black hair, although it was much shorter than Harry's so it was almost impossible to tell.

I should try that, Harry thought.

Reaching the mark directly across the room Gray touched it as well and a door opened next to it.

"Mom? Dad? Wake up! Ren?" He wandered into it, and his voice echoed. "I've found him! Get out here!"

There was a sound like sand running through an hourglass, a sound which Harry was familiar with from house points shifting around at Hogwarts. He also recognized it as the sound when one of the invisible doorways appeared or disappeared. Sand through an hourglass... like every particle of the stone wall is moving around against each other as it shifts out of the way.

"Gray, why are you shouting?" came a sleepy female voice. "If you ever wake me up again I will tie you up and toss you off the ledge."

"Don't doubt I'd still pull you with me somehow." Gray said, "I've found Harry."

"No joke?" Asked the female voice.

"You know I wouldn't joke about that. Help me wake Mom and Dad."

"What about him?"

"Better not."

Harry was curious. Who's 'him'?

There was the sound of more shifting rock and Gray called out again about Harry. Harry shifted nervously. There were voices talking back in the darkness of the tunnel that lay behind the doorway, but a girl wandered into the room, rubbing her eyes and peering at him. "... Harry?"

"Yeah." Harry replied, uncomfortable. She too had very dark eyes, but her shoulder-length hair was light brown and a little wavy. And her wings...

"Hey—" Harry started, surprised.

"— why haven't you got any wings." The girl finished for him. "Yes, yes, I know." She yawned, and didn't answer the question. She was younger than Gray, closer to Harry's age, possibly younger. She sat on the other end of the sofa where Gray had before and watched the door, waiting expectantly. Harry wondered if he had offended her, he probably had.

Thirty seconds later Gray returned, trailing his parents, who stopped at stood staring at him. Harry stared back. He wasn't too surprised to see the woman didn't have any wings either. The man looked a lot like James, but his face was rounder as well as several other differences Harry couldn't immediately identify; Gray looked a lot like

him. The woman – Harry’s aunt, he supposed – clapped her hands to her cheeks and opened her mouth as if she was squealing silently, and then came and hugged Harry tightly. He sat stiffly, hugs still fazed him. Finally she stopped and squeezed in between her daughter and Harry himself, hand over her mouth.

“You really are alive!” She said happily.

“Indeed,” affirmed the man, who hadn’t moved.

“I’m your aunt Amanda.” She beamed at him. “That is my husband Lexian, and this one is your cousin Ren.” She put her hand on Ren’s head. “And Gray’s introduced himself to you?”

Harry nodded.

“How did this happen, Gray?” She asked him.

He shrugged stoically, but his mouth twitched a little, resisting a smile. “Did some spying, looked into some paperwork, and tracked him down. Then I just picked him up and took off.”

Ren chuckled to herself.

Amanda did the opposite, she frowned and looked concerned. “Picked him up?”

“Yeah, he was passed out in a chair somewhere.”

Harry’s uncle Lexian finally spoke up. “Did you get to him in time?”

The room went silent. Then Gray shook his head. They all looked at Harry.

“What?” he asked, bewildered.

Amanda then took one of his hands, and slid up his sleeve. Harry gaped. “What on Earth!”

“— on Origin.” Ren corrected.

Harry slid his other sleeve up. Each forearm was now encased in a wide metal band that stretched from right above his wrist to right below his elbow. They were dull silver and thick. Twisting his arm around, he saw that there was a circle of writing imprinted around the middle. Harry couldn't read it. "What does it say?" he asked.

Gray walked up and inspected them too. "It's just spells, it doesn't say anything. Because of those, we can't remove them. Only someone of very high authority can arrange that. I'm very sorry."

"They're called gates." Lexian added. "They keep you more or less under their control. You can't port at all. That is provided you're not in the Pit, where you can't port anyway."

Harry gazed dumbly at him. "... but I did." He said after coming back to reality. "I ported in, as you called it, right next to the Keep."

They quietly contemplated this. Gray finally spoke. "That's extremely odd. According to legends, Dark Eyes made porting impossible inside the Pit. Our legends are very accurate. Nobody's ever been able to do it before so it's considered a fact."

"Gray would have been an Educated." Amanda said proudly. "If anybody would know, it's him. He's studied everything, even all about Earth and the other worlds. When they were very young I would tell them all about Origin outside the pit, so they both have interest that kind of stuff."

"Have you heard of Hogwarts?" Harry asked Gray curiously.

Gray rubbed his chin, his now trademark motion. "Yes, I think I have. Wizarding school, right mom?"

Amanda nodded. "Yes, James and Lily went there. They brought back all kinds of crazy things too, casting sticks and whatnot. I'm sure we've still got tons of it around here that we got after James and Lily left; they left most of their stuff so as their closest relatives we got all of it." She gestured to a large pile of books stacked high in the corner,

where boxes sat closed and small objects were shoved against. “Oh dear, had I known you were coming I would have cleaned up a bit.”

“It’s okay.” Harry shrugged. “I like it here anyway. It’s kind of comforting to have clutter around, makes it feel more like a home than just a room.” Harry thought of the Burrow, which was even messier and parts were falling apart, it had the same effect. “So...” he said unsurely, “My parents lived here? Why did my dad go to Hogwarts if he could just use a casting stone?”

“Your dad was interested in other worlds, kind of like Gray here, and we visited Earth at some point.” Lexian said. “He was extremely curious about how their casting sticks worked. So while we were visiting different countries my parents said he could stay, and somehow got him admitted into Hogwarts. He was only to stay a couple months, but when it was time to leave he didn’t want to. He said he’d made friends and it was more fun than Studies. He talked about flying, except not with his wings which I still don’t understand. So from then on we were kind of in limbo between Earth and Origin. My parents and I would stay there for a while, or he would visit us very often.”

Lexian was about to say more, but Amanda shushed him and held up her hands. “Explanations tomorrow, now it’s time for sleep.” Ren grunted in agreement.

“Hey I’m wide awake.” Harry said with a smile.

“No surprise, you just woke up from a comatose sleep. We have a couple extra rooms stored away somewhere, I’m sure we can dig one up. Follow me.” Gray waved him over and walked through the open door. Harry got to his feet and the rest of his family was right behind.

My family... people who aren’t the Dursleys, who actually care enough to watch out for me, who knew my parents better than anyone back on Earth could have. This is a dream come true. It’s almost worth suffering in the Keep to get to this cave.

The light was dim just like the rest of the Pit; Harry was still amazed how well he could see in the dark. Glancing back at Ren to look at

her eyes, he smiled inwardly at the subtle differences compared to wingless humans he knew. A door was open farther down the hall, and her eyes practically reflected like a cats in the dark, glinting. She was more than human.

Lexian disappeared into his room, and Amanda lingered a moment, watching them. She caught Harry's eye and smiled before following him. It was Ren who leaned against the wall, watching as Gray staring up at the ceiling intently. Harry stood uncertainly, not sure what they were doing.

"Well... the best I can find." Gray said finally, pointing at the ceiling. He moved his hand downward onto the wall and in front of him, and a black rune trailed off the ceiling, several feet behind the pointing finger but then it rolled to a stop. "Think you can remember what this one looks like?" Gray asked.

Harry leaned forward and inspected it. Fundamentally it resembled a ying-yang symbol, but not quite. He looked at the other symbols on the walls around them; none was anything like his so it shouldn't be a problem. He nodded.

"Alrighty then!" Gray said.

Ren yawned loudly. "That's all very fine of course, but it's rather obsolete considering he doesn't even know how to open the doors."

Gray looked irked. "Obviously I was going to teach him that next."

"Obviously." She repeated.

"Look here Harry. This symbol means—"

"Right," she interrupted loudly.

"What now?" He said stiffly without turning to look at her.

"That's rather fine as well, but it wouldn't work because he doesn't have a casting stone." Ren turned away and said airily, "Goodnight then, boys. Have fun with that." She opened a door for herself.

"You wouldn't remember anything if you'd been up for three days running around the entire Pit, either." Gray said loudly. The door shut. Gray shook his head. "Well it's not like that's a hard to fix problem. I'd open and shut it for you but then you'd be trapped inside unfortunately. How about," He opened the door. "We leave the door open but put up a barrier that you can walk through but not see or hear through. That should give you privacy, we just won't come in until you come out." A sheet of black covered the door completely.

"Sounds okay," Harry said. As Gray left for his room Harry stepped right into the darkness of his own, but once he was through he saw it wasn't dark at all. He looked around. A faint glow filled the room but he couldn't find its source. The furniture was simple, bed was pushed into the corner next to a dresser, a table with several chairs and the floor were strewn with clothes. He pushed them aside with one foot, and unsure what to do next, lay down on his stomach on the bed. It seemed like the corner of his bed near his left foot was lower than the rest of the bed, but he didn't care.

Whatever, Harry thought, suddenly sleepy.  
"Harry!" Someone yelled.

Harry woke up, blinking his eyes. It was dark all around him. Then somebody smacked one of his wings really hard, and he realized he had them closed around himself like a cocoon. He opened them slightly, wary.

"Damn it!" Ren appeared, bouncing on her knees on the bed beside him. "Be careful, you cut me."

"With what?" he asked, confused. Her finger was bleeding.

"These." She pointed to the tips of his wings, and he spread one slightly and she then pointed at the exact feathers. "They're sharp. You could've taken my finger off or something."

He blinked around the room, where the glow was now bright.  
"Whatever happened to me having privacy?"

"Like I listen to anything Gray says." She shrugged.

Harry laughed a little. "Do you even like Gray?"

She looked at him as if considering something. "You wouldn't understand. You've never had a sibling."

Harry was hurt. She saw the look on his face and gently slapped him. "Hey. Stop that. I didn't mean to say that. What I mean is that I like him, but I'd never admit it. Except for now because you've tricked me into it. Don't tell anybody or I'll tell them you sleep sucking your thumb."

"But I don't." Harry said confused.

"Yeah I know." She said nonchalantly.

Harry just shook his head, amused. He stretched, and then stopped to wrap a hand around one of the 'gates' on his arm. Ren sat cross-legged and reached over to do the same.

"Weird." She said, looking up to smile at him. "Don't worry, we'll get them off."

Harry gave a half smile, still concerned. "I got a completely different impression of you last night." He told her. "You looked like you wanted me to leave."

"Ah. Well. Don't mess with me in the middle of the night, I'm rather irritable. You won't be so lucky as to have me leave you alone the rest of the time, daytime you're acceptable prey."

Harry laughed again. He liked Ren too, although she was quite unlike Gray. "If you don't mind me asking... why don't you have wings?"

She shrugged. "Well your mother didn't and neither does mine, they were both human as my mother taught us to call it. Half-people is just a superstitious name. So there's always a chance to not be born with wings. It's a large possibility, maybe one out of four. You and Gray

both did but I didn't. It doesn't mean I'm unlike you in any other ways, I'm a Silent in every other aspect."

"Silent..." Harry repeated.

"Yeah." She chuckled. "It's kind of a joke, actually. We aren't in touch with any of the other species, while they all see each other on a regular basis. So we never really said much to them. We were called the Cylants, c-y-l-a-n-t-s pronounced 'sillants' which was so close to 'silence' that they started calling us the Silents. In casual terms we adopted that name though Cylant is written in all documents and papers."

"So is being wingless much of a problem?" Harry wondered.

Ren looked uncomfortable and Harry wished he hadn't asked. "Sometimes. I need help getting places of course, and people sometimes take a while to accept me." She stood up. "You missed breakfast. Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Well let's go outside anyway. Gray left some of his clothes outside the door so you can change out of these ratty things." She shook his sleeve and he looked at what she was wearing. It was a pair of loose pants that billowed slightly before coming together at her ankles, where she had several toe rings on her bare feet. On top she had what could be a dress if it didn't have long slits from the hip down each side, it went to her knees and was dark purple. The top was loose and had designs stitched onto the front and it cinched in at the waist by a black band of cloth. Next to hers his clothes were definitely ratty. "I'll meet you in the living room," she said and left. Her foot appeared back through the barrier as she pushed in a folded pile of clothes with it.

Harry walked over and held them up. Dark blue pants and a loose two layered long sleeved shirt. He tried them on, they fit pretty well. On the back of his shirt, just like his Keep clothes were two long slits so when he pulled it over his head it slid neatly around his wings. On these though there were clasps on the inside where they could be

folded over each other and held together until you couldn't really tell anymore. It took him a while to get it together behind his back, and then he hesitated at the door. It all felt so odd to him. He was not yet over the shock of being here at all, and now he was trying to deal with all this. He sighed and stepped through and walked down the hall to the living room.

Gray was kneeling with his back to Harry, and Ren sat next to him, leaning over something on the ground. Harry walked up curiously to see what they were looking at. He stood behind them and leaned over too. "What are you guys doing?"

"Making freeze moss," Ren said. They had a thin square of cloth laid out on the floor with bits of green sprinkled it, which they were crushing with a rock.

"What's freeze moss?" Harry asked curiously, sitting down next to them. The green bits sparkled. "It doesn't look like moss."

Gray said, "It is."

At the same time Ren said "It's crystal." They looked at each other.

"Sort of." Ren added.

"It's both." Gray finally stated, leaning back.

Harry looked closer. "Okay... sort of moss... and crystal..." It just looked like powder now that they'd crushed it.

"We actually don't really know. It's moss that grows in deep wet, naturally formed caves that thread through the mountain, usually closer to the bottom of the Pit. Except it seems to crystallize, so we're not sure if it's just crystals forming or weird moss. But it grows pretty fast so we call it moss." Ren clarified.

"What's it for?" Harry asked.

Ren grinned mischievously and Gray's mouth twitched. "Seriously messing yourself up!" she said gleefully.

"It's called freeze moss because it sort of... freezes your brain for a bit. Interesting effects." Gray said.

"Not interesting, fun!" Ren said loudly.

Harry wrinkled his forehead. "So it's a drug."

"Poison actually." Ren said.

"So you kill people with it?" Harry was alarmed.

"No, no, no. It's only a poison to other people, Humans, Bloodbeasts, Centaurs and the like. It can't hurt us. Not much can hurt us actually." Gray said firmly. "So we couldn't kill anybody here with it."

Ren licked a finger and stuck it in the powder, then touched it to her tongue. She grinned naughtily. "Try it."

"Um... no thanks."

"We're not susceptible to poisons, we have very versatile immune systems. There's no harm in trying it." Gray looked at Harry earnestly, and Harry decided that if Gray said so it must be true.

"I guess." Harry supposed. Ren mimed licking her finger and Harry did the same, copying her movements of touching his finger to the powder and then to his tongue, where it tingled furiously. He watched Gray fold the fabric twice, then roll it together and tied it with a piece of rope.

"Have to put it away good so Mom doesn't ever get into it." He explained and got to his feet.

Ren started laughing a little. Harry looked at her, and she seemed to be glowing slightly almost. Surprised, he rubbed at his eyes, looking around the room. All of the colors seemed brighter, and everything looked to be really big. In some part of his head Harry realized that nothing had actually changed, but it still looked different to him. Either way it still looked pretty silly. Harry felt giddy and had the urge to

laugh along with Ren, so he did. It made him feel better, to momentarily forget the gates and the Queen's People, Origin and all it held in the future for him.

## Chapter Six: Fire versus Ice Part Two

"Harry..." Ren pulled lazily at his sleeve. Harry mumbled a response from where he was face down in the couch, but it was unintelligible. After some more tugging, he finally sat up. "You fell asleep," she told him. "Gray left."

"Where'd he go?" Harry wondered, shaking his head slightly, wondering if his head was really clear or if he just thought it was. There was a slight bitter taste in his mouth, but it was pleasant, like bitter chocolate is pleasant.

"Dunno?" Ren replied. Then she smiled slowly. "I think I know where we can find him." She giggled in a way that was a bit unlike her.

"Where?" asked Harry, but Ren didn't reply.

"So should we just stay here?" He asked again, and this time she nodded.

He thought he'd only closed his eyes for a second, but when Harry looked around again, Ren was on the other side of the room sitting at the table, drinking a glass of water and sorting through a box of string and colorful beads. She looked to be decorating one of her shirts. The shirt already had streams of color twisting across it, and she leaned over it intensely, biting her lower lip slightly. Harry smiled. She's family.

The sound of sifting sand filled the room and Harry knew without looking that the door to the hallway was open. Gray walked in, looking around shortly before joining Ren at the table.

"That's looking nice." Gray said sincerely.

"Thanks." She barely glanced up before going back to her work.  
"Where you...?"

Gray sighed. "Yeah."

"And?"

"He's not happy." Gray shrugged. "Would you be?"

"Who are you talking about?" Harry interrupted. "Is it the 'him' you mentioned yesterday when I got here?"

They looked at him. "Well..." Gray shifted uneasily.

"His name is Alexander." Ren interrupted. "Our older brother. Your other cousin."

Harry sat up straight, surprised, but Gray still looked uneasy. "When do I meet him?"

They looked at him in silence.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked. Ren murmured something to Gray, who nodded reluctantly, and they motioned for him to follow. Upon getting to his feet, Harry felt a little unsteady but masked it as he walked confidently behind them into the hall. They walked past the doors he already found familiar, which remained closed, and further down the corridor they stopped at an area in the wall where Harry could make out a dark splotch on the wall. It took him a moment to realize it was a door marker like the others.

Gray touched it lightly and it opened. It seemed to take longer to open than the others did, since a moment later Harry still stood watching it open, eyebrows raised in concern. What's going on? Why didn't they tell me about this Alexander before, is he sick?

The room inside was huge, much larger than the one Harry had stayed in. On the far side someone was sitting at a desk.

"Alexander?" Ren called hesitantly. Alexander got to his feet and walked toward him. He look at Harry, and their eyes met. Gray and Harry looked similar, but between Alexander and Harry the resemblance was uncanny. Alexander was quite a few years older, and he seemed to be all of the things that bridged the gap of Gray's and Harry's looks, if you could merge their faces together. Harry

wanted to smile warmly but he was too confused. I still don't understand what's going on.

Harry wanted to ask Gray, but after a moment's trying he came to the conclusion that he simply could not break his gaze, his eyes were locked on Alexanders and turning to look at Gray was simply impossible.

Alexander stopped. Crouching slightly, he gave a vicious snarl, showing his teeth. Shocked, Harry took a step back, and heard himself growl in return. All of a sudden Alexander disappeared from view as the door shut in Harry's face. Ren stood next to the door marker, having just closed it.

"Alexander is like you." Gray said, and Harry tried to clear his head. He sat down where he was, right in the hallway, and Gray and Ren sat on either side of him.

"It seems to work like that." Ren said. "The firstborn is usually the one who's cursed. In my family, Alexander got the full Silent heritage, Gray got less landing him in a happy middleground, and there wasn't quite enough left over for me, I'm too human."

"What do you mean, 'too Human'?" Gray said disapprovingly. "You're 'too Ren' if you ask me."

"This is my home, this is where I was born. I just don't fit."

"So..." Harry finally came out of his silent reverie. "Me and Alexander will just never be able to hang out, ever."

"Basically. And since you came he's been hanging out in his room to keep that from happening. Cursed people just... aggravate each other with their presence and start fighting, it gets really nasty."

"But he's my cousin, I wouldn't want to hurt him!"

"We know Harry." Ren said soothingly. "We know. But we just tested that, and you saw what happened." Speaking to Gray, she added, "Let's not mention this to Mom and Dad."

"Agreed." Gray grimaced. "They wouldn't be happy we tried that."

Harry wasn't really paying attention, he was really sad. "So before you said Alexander wasn't happy, what did you mean?"

"You know, he wants to meet you and knows he can't, and he's been stuck in his room." Gray told him.

"Hey cheer up, Harry!" Ren elbowed him, seeing his expression. "It's not your fault."

"I just felt like I belonged here." Harry said wistfully. "But I can't belong here because I'm keeping Alexander locked up in his room, that's not fair, this is his home."

The three sat quietly in the hall for another minute, Ren and Gray giving Harry his space. "So how does he get to stay here and not in the Keep, exactly?"

"Well we clanspeople do things a little differently," Gray explained, "We're kind of like the wizards in your world, only the muggles know of us and we live side by side.'

"Muggles," Harry corrected.

"Right. I should reread my Earth book. So Cursed among the regular people get sent to the Keep, but among the clanspeople we can keep them in check in our own homes. Unlike the doors most people have, we have our shifting walls, and so if a Cursed were to... have an episode, they couldn't escape and hurt anyone. We can protect ourselves with our casting stones so we're not in any danger. Alexander just never leaves home without an escort."

"Except now he can't even leave his room, because of me," Harry pointed out.

"Don't worry about it! He knows it's important that you came here, and he's got a huge room with all his things in it already. You're welcome to stay as long as you like, Harry, we can set up a big room

for you like his and you can take turns coming out for meals so you never get stuck in a room together, it would work."

Through the hall the sound of shifting stone came from the front room.

"Did you double check that there's no freeze moss on the floor?" Gray asked Ren. "It would probably kill our mom so we have to be extra careful," he reminded Harry.

"Of course I double checked," Ren said sourly.

"Harry, Gray, Ren?" Aunt Amanda called from the front room, Harry could hear several objects being placed on a table. "I went and got food, we can eat in a few minutes, alright?"

"Okay!" They responded together.

"We don't need many meals, we eat one big meal together, generally." Gray told Harry. "But there's always food available, you'll find yourself being more hungry than us. You're too skinny anyway, your high body heat will need extra calories."

Harry nodded, remembering his huge meal in the Keep, it had been gone so quickly. The three walked into the living room together and took a seat.

"They're searching for you," Lexian told Harry. "We were questioned shortly. You probably shouldn't go out without hiding your face, Harry. They don't have the right to come in here and actually look, but if the Queen comes by and asks us personally we would have to let her go through our home or it would prove our guilt."

"We wanted to go get him his casting stone," Ren said pleadingly. "He can't open doors without it."

Lexian nodded. "Just disguise yourselves somehow. And keep a close eye on Harry." He sniffed the air slightly. "Is that freeze moss I smell?" He winked at them, and chuckled. Then he went to go help Amanda, who was bringing food to the table. It was mostly the same

things Harry had eaten in the Keep, but nicely prepared. The sauce smelled heavenly, and Harry said so, earning a smile from Amanda.

They sat to eat, Harry looked down at his plate. I guess being upset took my appetite. He picked at his food. And, even though the sauce is wonderful, I'm kind of put off by these vegetables since last time.

"Harry, you need to eat." Amanda admonished.

Harry shrugged. "I'm just not very hungry."

They sat in silence for a minute, as Harry picked at his food he got the feeling they were all watching him. Suddenly Lexian slammed the table. "We're not going to poison you Harry!"

Harry looked at him in astonishment. "I didn't think you were!" he replied.

Lexian sighed. "Sorry Harry." He got to his feet and left the room. Amanda sighed.

"What did I do?" Harry asked softly, miserable, after he was sure Lexian was completely gone. I didn't mean anything by it! I'm here one day and I've already messed up my cousin's life and made my uncle mad.

"You didn't, Harry, it's okay." Amanda told him. "See, Lexian and James had a very close relationship, I don't think that he ever forgave his older brother for leaving him entirely." She pointed at Harry. "You, Harry, look a lot like your father."

"I've heard," Harry said.

"It just brings back painful memories. Forgive Lexian, he's having a hard time with this. He wants you to be happy here, though, trust me. It was hard for both of us when your parents left. Lily was the only other human woman in the pit, she was my best friend and companion, it hasn't been the same all these years since she left for good." She smiled kindly. "It's a gift to have you among us, Harry."

Harry felt a stir of emotion. "Thank you, that means so much to me."

"Lets go!" Ren said excitedly. "I want to get your casting stone now. How exciting!"

"How are we going to disguise ourselves?" Harry asked. He waved one of his huge black wings slightly to one side, careful not to wave it near anyone, remembering how razor sharp they were. That's why when I first flapped my wings and tried to fly, they jumped back and looked at me angrily! They thought I wasn't being careful enough.

"They will be watching the main shaft." Gray said. "But this is a big mountain. There are endless tunnels winding through it, there's too many other ways around the main way. They can't watch all of them so I doubt they're trying. I know some we can get around. We can wear some big cloaks, and me and Ren can walk on either side of you like we're guarding you. Nobody is going to provoke you intentionally or anything so we should be safe."

Ren ran to dig through a pile of clothes, throwing a few waded up pieces of material out of it. She shook one out. "A little wrinkled, but good!"

Harry left his food and went to try one on, it was rather like a long black cloak from back home, only with a huge slit from the upper back down, and a sash to tie it back together at the waist. He shrugged one on, and Ren tied the back for him.

"How do I look?" Harry modelled it for them, pulling on the hood.

"Particularly suspicious," Ren said, "But the Cursed are always up to something when they're out and about, so no one will think anything of it."

Amanda put a large plate in the middle of the table, leaving all the food on it. "This will be here Harry when you do get hungry."

Harry went and gave Amanda a hug of appreciation while Ren and Gray put their own cloaks on. She hugged him tight.

"One more thing." Ren said, taking one of Harry's hands and rolling back the sleeves of his cloak and tucking them behind the metal gates on arms.

"What are you doing that for?" Harry asked with a frown.

"They're your ticket, Harry, it means people won't report you. No Cursed is ever out and about without gates on, otherwise it wouldn't be safe," Ren explained. "The gates mean that the Queen has given her permission for you to be free in the Pit."

Harry still found them very distasteful. Then they are good for something, but it's all the Queen's fault that I have to wear them at all, I hate that about this place!

Amanda waved them goodbye, and they went out to their doorstep.

"Normally I carry Ren," Gray said. "But it would be much easier for you to do it."

"Oh," Harry said, slightly apprehensive.

"Don't worry!" Ren said. "I trust you." She smiled at him encouragingly. "I could climb on your back, if you think you can be careful enough with your wingtips, or you could hold me in front."

"I'd be afraid of dropping you, I think," Harry said, and kneeled. Ren laid her upper arms over where Harry's wings grew from his back, and over his shoulders, grabbing her left wrist with her right hand. It feels odd when somebody touches my wings, Harry thought. I'm still not used to them being there at all.

Ren gripped his waist with her knees, and Harry got to his feet, extending his wings experimentally. He could barely feel her there at all, and she didn't get in the way. "Ready!" Ren said.

Gray flew off, and Harry followed, relishing the stretch of his wings. They flew to a ledge not too far away and stepped in another cave. Ren let go and jumped down to her feet. The three then went through hallways of what looked like storage. The ceilings were low and it

smelled moist. Everything was dark, but Harry and his cousins saw it all with their nightvision.

In a back room, they found a hole low to the ground, Ren kneeled and crawled through easily. Harry followed, having a harder time with it as he tucked his wings as close as he could to his body. Gray brought up the rear, tucking in his own wings and squeezing through the hole with less difficulty.

"There's a whole web of tunnels in this mountain." Gray said. "Most of the time you can get by tucking your head down, but sometimes you have to crawl. There's places where the tunnels dwindle away entirely, just keep getting smaller and smaller and then you have to backtrack. It's easy to get lost. Luckily-

"You are in the presence of the tunnel Queen!" Ren exclaimed victoriously. "Not being able to fly, I spent a lot of my childhood wandering through here, I know them inside out. That's the only reason we can get to where we're going undetected, most people just get lost."

"It takes a hell of a lot longer to get where you're going, so no one bothers." Gray said, and Ren glared at him. "But it's very useful," he added.

Ren patted him on the head. "Good Gray."

"Hey!" he complained.

Harry laughed. "Are we going, or are we going to stand around some more?"

Ren flipped her long hair at them and strode off into the tunnel. Being shorter than both of them, she walked straight off, but Harry had to duck his head, which wasn't much of a problem. The problem was that the tips of his wings extended up over his head, and he had to really bend his knees and lean forward.

"Excuse my behind," he told Gray, who laughed.

It did take a hell of a long time, Harry's neck and back were so cramped after a while that he simply followed Ren as fast as he could, hoping to be out of there soon. Ren slithered before him effortlessly, at home in her element.

"Eh." Gray complained from behind him painfully.

"Eh!" Harry agreed.

"We're almost there boys, stop whining." Ren told them, and eventually the tunnel started widening, and she stopped abruptly. "Stop. We have a problem."

"What," Gray asked, exasperated with the situation.

"Well of course I had to lead, because I'm the one that knows the way. But this is the best route for where we're going and it doesn't have a ledge. It ends a small hole that comes out the wall of the main shaft of the Pit." She pointed out the obvious, "I will fall."

Gray sighed. "Er, so try to get behind Harry somehow."

Harry squeezed to one side of the tunnel, leaning against the wall. Ren pushed her way around him, which moved him backward somewhat into Gray who had to take a few steps back.

"I'm glad we've become so close," Ren said to Harry right in his ear.

"Me too." He said, smiling. Once she was behind him, he kneeled for her to resume her previous perch, and then continued in a crawling position with her on his back.

"Are you tickling the back of my neck?" Harry demanded.

"No of course not." Ren said, doing it again.

"Whoa." Harry said. He'd reach the opening of the tunnel, it was what she said, a small hole on the side of the sheer cliff of the Pit. There weren't any ledges nearby.

"You have to push yourself out and quickly open your wings so they catch air." Gray explained. "I supposed that's kind of an advanced move, isn't it?"

"I'm taking the crash course." Harry commented.

"Please don't take that term literally?" Ren asked, and they laughed. Ren tightened her hold on him as he kneeled on the edge and shoved off. They plummetted for a few feet, then Harry got his wings open and caught the air, flapping a few times up and away from the tunnel opening.

"Wooooo!" Ren whooped. "That was fun!"

Gray pulled off the same maneuver and he caught up to Harry, both flapping lazily in the still air, holding their position as if they were standing face to face. Harry tried to work out the tightness of his wings from the tunnel.

"Up there, now," Gray pointed. "We're going to the clan's storerooms, your casting stone will be there somewhere."

"I have one already?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, it was made for you when you were born, you would have gotten it when you started training with it but you weren't here so it will still be in storage." Gray told him, "I think I can find it."

They found a ledge up above them that was big, not quite as big as the ledge in front of the Queen's hall but nearly.

"The store rooms aren't guarded or anything?" Harry asked.

"No," Ren said, "Casting stones don't work for anybody but who they're made for, there would be no sense for anyone to steal it. Stealing is pretty harshly punished, it happens rarely."

They walked into the cave, and Harry was impressed. It was a large round room with many openings all around it, and in the center was a

round pool with a ledge for sitting and dipping your feet into. "This is nice."

"Cool off with me, Harry, while Gray rummages around." Ren jumped down from his back and ran over to the pool, splashing into it. Harry waited until she had taken a seat before joining her, putting his feet into the cool, clear water.

"That feels refreshing." He said with a sigh. Gray looked over the doors, reading words inscribed above them before picking one and disappearing into it. "That tunnel killed me."

"Sorry, you want me to massage your back?" Ren asked, bobbing her feet on the surface of the water, gleefully creating little splashes and ripples.

"Honestly?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. I mean, you have to carry me, you might as well not be all cramped up and uncomfortable." Ren pushed his shoulder so that he turned a little. "Consider it as me watching out for my own safety. Now spread your wings a little and keep them out of my way." She held up her thumb to remind him of the cut.

Harry grabbed her hand and looked at it. "It's nearly healed already," he said.

"Of course," she said, "Naturally."

Harry followed her instructions and closed his eyes in bliss as she kneaded the tense muscles of his back.

"You've got crazy muscles back here, you know that?" Ren commented. "Those big wings need a lot of support."

"That's good," Harry said, eyes still closed. "So you like to decorate your clothes, right?"

"Yep." She said. "I make them and decorate them, it's fun. It's a hobby of mine. I've traded shirts for all kinds of fun things."

"Neat."

"Harry?" Gray's voice echoed to them, slightly distant.

"What?" Harry groaned, not wanting his massage to be disrupted.

"I think I found it, it's not labelled very well. Can you come so I can check?"

Harry groaned again, and Ren stopped, jumping into the pool, which was as deep as mid-thigh. She didn't seem to mind getting wet. She splashed at him, "Now get! I'll stay here and play."

"Alright," He said, water trickling down his face. "I'm going." He went through the door Gray had gone through.

"Over here!" Gray called, and Harry followed his voice down further, passing by open doorways filled with shelves and boxes. He found the one that Gray was standing in, next to a small pile of boxes. Gray opened one, and held it up for Harry to see.

"Oh!" Was all Harry could say. "Wow." It was a small perfectly round sphere of a stone, a brilliant clear green like his eyes. It's beautiful!

Gray held it up it's long, thin silver chain, and Harry ducked his head so Gray could put it on him. Beautiful, but more than that...

"It's like I know it already," Harry tried to explain.

"Good, that's why I had you come back here. I knew by the look on your face that this was it."

Several indistinguishable voices floated to them down the hallway, and both listened carefully. Ren's voice could be heard also. Quick as they could Harry and Gray gathered up the boxes, including Harry's empty one and shoved them back on the shelf. With long steps they strode through the hallway back to where Ren waited.

"Wait here," Gray whispered as they got to the doorway, firmly stopping Harry with a hand on his shoulder, and stepped into the room.

"Ah, there he is, I was wondering how you got here." Three boys stood around Ren, wings slightly flared in a circle. She was glaring at them. They had different shades of mottled wings, but all three had the same haughty expression, and two of the three were larger than Gray.

"What's wrong with you?" Gray said disgustedly. "Get away from my sister."

"Are you sure she's your sister?" The one who had spoken before said. "Oh right, you're part Half-person yourself!"

"That never matters to anyone," Gray said, "Why do you care?"

"I don't, I was just wondering how the handicapped one got here. Curiosity is all."

"I flew in better style than you did." Ren said, making a gesture with her hand unfamiliar to Harry. Harry decided it was a rude gesture by how their faces contorted with anger.

"How exactly can anything be considered that?" He asked. Harry didn't wait any longer, stepping into the room. He felt his face was slightly flushed.

"I flew with him," Ren said pointing at Harry. The three boys took one look in his direction, and after one shocked second they stumbled away from the pool, running outside where they scrambled off the ledge.

"Effective," Gray noted.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Ren asked, looking at him with concern. Getting to her feet she walked over and took his hand. "It's okay, I don't mind. They're just ignorant."

Harry didn't answer. He was feeling slightly dizzy.

"Come sit in the pool for a minute, okay?" She pulled him over to the pool, and he sat right in it this time, and Ren joined him. He closed his eyes, after a minute he felt immensely better, the cool water draining the tension from him like the massage had. He opened his eyes, finding Ren looking right at him.

"Are you okay?" She asked again, voice slightly shaky. "They would never have done anything if they knew you were here, I know Gray wanted you to remain unseen but maybe it would have been better if they'd left immediately."

Harry nodded. "I feel fine now."

"Okay good, time to go home." Gray said, and they got to their feet. "Ren, you stand here in the middle, Harry you go way over there, and I'll go on the other side, and we'll flap our wings as hard as we can—well I will, you just flap a little, okay? You and Ren need to be dry so that no one slips while flying."

Harry followed instructions and the round room soon felt like the inside of a small tornado. This is probably what sitting in Aunt Petunia's clothes dryer would feel like, Harry thought.

It didn't take long until they were ready to go. They did their same trip in reverse, getting back into the hole in the side of the cliff was harder than getting out, Harry had to duck in quickly without bashing Ren on the top edge of the tunnel entrance or cutting her with his wings, but he managed it. The tunnel trip seemed shorter than before, and Harry felt relief as he landed on his aunt and uncle's ledge to go into their family cave.

"Let's do another crash course." Ren said brightly. "In magic. First we need to teach you how to open doors."

The rest of the day went by quickly as Gray and Ren tried to stuff Harry's skull with all the knowledge that would fit about casting stone magic. It was very different, it relied on thought to cue the magic instead of words, so you had to be very careful what you were thinking. He wore his stone on its chain under his shirt. It was pretty,

but needed to be in contact with his skin so he wouldn't be wearing it out where anyone could see it.

As he fell asleep in the guest bedroom, door properly closed, Harry ran his fingers over the green stone's smooth surface and smiled.

When a noise in his room woke him abruptly a couple hours later, he wasn't smiling. A freezing cold breeze blew through his room, and his skin was tingling, alive. As he peered into the darkness, he was almost positive what he saw was someone standing, looking down on him by the end of his bed. It wasn't Lexian, it wasn't Amanda, it wasn't Ren, and it wasn't Gray. There was a strange pressure in his head, like the beginning of a headache.

Harry did all he could think to do at the time: he coughed a fireball onto his pillow. His pillow burst into flames, right next to his hand, Harry jerked his hand away but he'd felt only the heat and there were no signs of burns. Well the fire is inside me, I sure hope it wouldn't burn me.

Before he could properly take a look at who was standing next to his bed, something leaped on him. Its claws scratched at him through his clothes, digging into his skin without breaking the surface. They felt like icy cold daggers. Freezing cold breath blew over his face, and he looked up into the alien eyes of the critter attacking him. It looked like a white lizard the size of an alligator.

Yelling in alarm, Harry wrestled it, flipping over and off the bed. They landed with a thump, Harry on top. Someone else tried to grab him from behind, but Harry abruptly remembered his extra weapons and flapped his wings urgently, feeling his wingtips slice into flesh as someone swore. His attacker from behind persisted, trying to grab his wrist and pull him backwards.

"Thought you get get me in my sleep?" Harry yelled, fighting it. The grip on his wrist reversed direction, going with the force Harry was using to resist. Harry's face slammed against the ground and he was stunned temporarily. He was given only split second to recover before the white lizard came at him, claws out. Harry sluggishly managed to

hit it, though he felt like he was going in slow motion, and they rolled across the floor a couple feet before running into the wall of the cave. The sudden stop of momentum jarred both of them but Harry was a step ahead, closing his hands around the Lizard's throat. Under his palms, its neck felt strangely delicate, and he choked it until he heard bone crack. The lizard stilled.

Harry rested on the hard stone for a moment before remembering his other attacker, the one who'd been watching him as he woke. Sitting up and looking around, he found the other one was gone. He probably left while I was distracted by the white lizard. He gave the lizard a second glance. It's dead... I killed it.

There wasn't any time to think about that just then. Harry ran to his door, to find it open. Oh Merlin. Out in the hall, he hollered in alarm, dropping to his knees. That same strange feeling hit his senses once again, the cool tingling. It was vaguely familiar. I think... maybe it's a portal opening. But you can't open portals in the Pit.

Harry found his family around him suddenly, touching him with concerned hands.

"What's wrong Harry?" Amanda asked urgently.

It was Ren who ran up to them again, eyes wide in panic. "Alexander's door is open. And he's gone."

Lexian got to his feet, face pale. Glancing down at Harry regretfully, he said, "Gray, get Natan."

## Chapter Eight: Queen's Hand

They sat next to the front door in a row: Lexian, Amanda, Gray, Harry, and Ren. Since the minute Natan had showed up following Gray, their home had been bustling with Natan's people. They searched Alexander's room for any clues, but Alexander was truly gone. His bed was a tangled mess, Harry looked at it once and had a sinking feeling, recalling his own nighttime encounter. Someone stood in front of Harry, asking him questions. Natan walked up next to the man. Behind them, two more carried the dead lizard body out of Harry's room.

"You killed it pretty dead." The other man commented. Natan just looked at Harry quietly. He's making me uneasy, Harry thought, agitated by the stares.

"I'm sorry about your son," Natan said, addressing Lexian and Amanda. "We're going to keep searching, but we have no idea how they got into your home, yet alone how they escaped and kidnapped a Cursed young man. That... body... will be taken for study."

"The body," Gray asked. "Do you know what it is?"

Natan shook his head. "No.." He looked over his shoulder, and shuddered. "That is the strangest... thing... I've ever seen." Finally he turned his eyes to Harry, saying quietly, "You know you need to come with me, right Harry."

Harry said nothing.

"No!" Amanda said. "We've already lost one family member tonight."

"Please." Natan gave her an indecipherable glance, something in between pity and dislike. "The Queen lets you clanspeople get away with almost anything. But not this." He motioned for Harry to follow him. Ren reached out and grabbed Harry's hand, squeezing it. She let go as he stood up.

His family looked at him from their dejected little line. Every face was pale. They kept their eyes on him sadly as Natan walked him to the door, and out of sight. Harry's heart wrenched. He said nothing.

"The Queen has been informed of tonight's events. I'm going to put you in a room where you can sleep, and early in the morning we will have a meeting concerning your future."

They soared down the pit, picking up speed faster and faster until they were very deep. First Harry thought they might be going to the Keep, but they stopped before they got that far and Natan led Harry a short way inside the mountain. The room he gave him was small but comfortable.

Harry didn't sleep for the rest of the night, and when they went to fetch him in the morning he was sitting on his bed.

"Come Harry, it's time." Natan said, opening the door. The blankets Harry had sat on restlessly all night were clearly not slept under. Harry got up and followed him; they didn't have long to go and didn't even have to fly. From a set of stairs they went up two floors into another room.

It was large, making the medium sized table in the center look small. Seated at the table was The Golden Lady- Queen Aeyris, and a man Harry didn't know. He was very tall and thin with closely cropped facial hair, and sharp eyes. He looked Harry over speculatively.

I don't like his look, Harry thought. I have no idea what he's thinking, but it can't be good.

Both at the table nodded at Natan in acknowledgement, and Natan guided Harry to a seat, and sat in the last chair himself.

Harry wasn't sure what to do with himself. He was torn between staring at the table and wringing his hands nervously or glaring. He settled on gazing at them calmly, unmoving. They look a little unsettled when I do that, don't they?

"We just had the summary of last night's events by the man who questioned everyone and made the report about it. What attacked you last night Natan wouldn't know about, because he's in charge of security in the mountain, all of the Pit. This is Iz." She gestured to the tall man on her left. "He's in charge of everything else. He's the Headmaster of the Academy, he handpicks the young ones that enter there, and organizes off-world missions and other travels out to the rest of Origin."

"What attacked you is called an Ice Lizard." Iz said. His voice was low and commanding. "They have mysteriously been cropping up around Origin for months now, but never in the Pit. It should be impossible for them to enter here, but somehow this one did. The upside is that we now have a body to study, it went to the Educated." He looked satisfied, "Should have known better to mess with the Silents, let alone a Cursed. No one has ever killed one before now."

"We're quite impressed," the Queen added. "It seems you've proved yourself capable, even of handling an attack in the middle of the night. So now the question is, what to do with you. I'm going to explain the situation, Harry." She leaned forward. "The Queen traditionally has one daughter, and that daughter becomes the next Queen when the Queen retires. Somewhere in the bloodline of the man I chose to be the father of my child was a healer, and Enna was born. You've seen her."

Harry nodded, understanding. Enna being a healer wasn't in the plan.

"Healers are for healing, not for ruling." Iz said quietly.

The Queen looked pained. "The problem with the 'Gift of the Gods' is that they seem to lack courage, or willpower. She's gotten used to her quarters and their many protections, but she hesitates to even go to the Hall. Nobody has seen her there in years, even if she does come she's too shy to sit in the front by the throne and be recognized as my daughter. She can't rule from her quarters, something needs to be done."

"We've decided to assign her a complete Hand." Iz said.

Harry was confused. What? A hand? What in Merlin's name does that mean?

"What do you mean, a hand?" he asked.

Iz nodded in understanding. "Ah. I see. She's right, you do seem to have holes in your memory."

No, Harry felt like explaining, but didn't. They seem to think I'm just a Cursed with amnesia, but I really don't know anything. I've never been here before. He considered that. Except for when I was born, I guess. That's so... mind-boggling, to think this is where I come from.

"A Hand is the term we use for our military units." Iz explained. "Each unit is a small, personal army of the Queen. They're called Hands to signify that they do the Queen's bidding, reaching like hands for her, but also because they traditionally have five members, like five fingers."

"A five person army?" Harry asked, slightly skeptical.

"This is what the Academy is for," Iz said, ignoring Harry's tone. "The people I've picked, every year at graduation from Studies, go through the Academy and are trained in depth to fill different capacities in a Hand. There are classes on being a leader, and classes on how to follow your leader, training with potions and fighting, work with theory... after Academy their teachers, having known them best, organize them into Hands. Then they start doing missions for me. This is how a Hand works: in the center is a Cursed. They don't go to the Academy. The Cursed is the main fighting force of this little army, the rest of the Hand serves to control and direct that force, and the other things they were trained to do. I've approached my teachers, and told them that even though this semester of the Academy is not complete, I'd like them to pick four of their absolute best students about to graduate and pull them out early. I've given them a day to deliberate, although most of them knew their best students already. We want you, Harry, to join them. With this Hand Enna will more than effectively protected, and hopefully this will give her confidence. It's time for her to learn to become Queen. That won't happen for a very

long time, but it will probably take just as long for her to learn effectively. It's more than time for her to start."

"So," Harry repeated, digesting this, "You want me to become part of one of these... Hands."

"Yes."

"The best you've got?" He repeated again.

"Yes," Iz said patiently.

"I suppose I don't have a choice in this." Harry said dejectedly.

"Of course you do!" the Queen said, "We wouldn't trust someone who doesn't want to do the job. You can choose between staying in the deepest depths of the Keep, or going places with Enna. When you're not needed, you will stay in one of the nicer, upper levels of the Keep."

"Is that why the Keep is as nasty as it is?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"The Keep is built as it is to be most effective." Iz answered, slightly annoyed. "It's under the Pit itself to be furthest away from where the Cursed could cause any harm to the rest of society."

That's depressing.

"Well of course I accept," Harry said. "I don't want to go down into the Keep." He held up his hands to show the gates. "That's what these are for, right? So I'm 'safe' for people out of the Keep. You've been planning this."

"Not planning," The Queen corrected, "Considering. This isn't a done deal Harry, we'll see how it goes."

"When do I meet the other people?" Harry asked.

"Now," Iz said, "Very soon. We'll bring some extra chairs in here, and you can wait. I'll be back to speak to everyone when they're assembled."

The three stood up.

"I'll be seeing you soon, Harry." The Queen said. She, Iz and Natan left the room, leaving Harry in his chair. Sure enough a few minutes later two extra chairs were added. A man dressed in the same uniform as the security in the Keep walked in quickly, not looking at Harry, put them down and left. About half an hour had passed, when the door finally opened again.

Looking up, Harry was mildly surprised. "Hey Jon," he said, grinning.

"Hey Harry," Jon said cheerfully. They clasped hands in greeting and Jon down next to Harry. "So what happened, where have you been? It's been crazy, one minute I leave you in that room and then I spend the next two days looking for you with my Grandfather. Then, suddenly, there's all these rumors about attacks and dead bodies, and you show up again! You're crazier than freeze moss."

Harry chuckled.

"You've tried it, then?" Jon laughed. "So, are you going to share what happened?"

Harry was suddenly serious. "That black stuff knocked me out for a long time." He held up his arms. "They did this."

Jon raised his eyebrows. "Whoa, let me see." He inspected one of the gates, tracing the letters. "Spells," He said, awestruck.

"Then when I woke up, I found myself being carried off."

"No way!"

"Yeah, and it was my cousin, he took me to my Dad's family that live here." Harry was feeling better just talking to Jon. "So I was there for a day, which was... I gotta say it was nice. Then while I was asleep

something attacked me but I fought it off. While I was distracted someone kidnapped my other cousin."

"No way!" Jon shook his head. "Dark." Then he grinned slyly. "Let's mess with people, okay?"

"How?"

"Here, I'm going to sit right next to you, like we're old friends." He scooted his chair closer. "Tuck your wings in tight. They'll think we know each other from the Academy, and since it's not that bright in here they'll figure your wings are dark brown, not black."

"Dark," Harry said, testing the word out.

"Now you've got it!" Jon slung his arm around Harry's shoulder.

"I have a question for you," Harry asked.

"Sure."

"How long do Silents live? I met someone in the keep who was twenty-six thousand years old."

"Really? That's pretty old." Jon looked impressed. "Of course there's really old Silents here and there but you don't ask them how old they are. We can be killed, though we're immune to most sicknesses and poisons and it takes a bit of effort to do someone in. If nothing happens to you, you can live as long as you want to live."

"That would be immortality." Harry pointed out, shocked. No way.

"In theory," Jon said, shaking his head. "But no, that never happens. We may not have a set lifespan like the other species but we all die eventually. It just works differently. We seem to continue living on willpower. When you get older you eventually lose that willpower, and you die. Sometimes it happens sooner instead of later. That guy you met in the Keep must have amazing willpower to continue living under those conditions."

Harry nodded in agreement. Aadon is probably the toughest person I've ever met.

"But there's a drawback to that. I guess Dark Eyes was the only one to choose this life for his species for that reason. If there's something that is a big enough shock or trauma, we simply suicide. People probably don't think about it before it happens. But say for example their loved ones die, they have this moment, where they understand their loss completely, and think they don't want to live. It's just a split second, but it's enough."

"I can see how that could be a problem." Harry said, realizing "Couldn't that start a chain reaction?"

"You grasp concepts quickly." Jon nodded. "Yes. Sometimes small chain reactions start and a whole family will be wiped out after the death of one family member. The Educated worry that there are certain people who would cause chain reactions that could wipe out large parts of the population."

"The Queen," Harry suggested.

"Exactly. For that reason, they try to have a new Queen in place before the old Queen gets too old. But our Queen is pretty young right now."

"Do you know what we're here for?" Harry asked. I wonder if they told him about Enna.

"Nope." Jon shrugged. "But I have to admit, it's pretty dark. Everyone at the Academy is going to be so jealous that we got picked for a special assignment right out of school."

The door opened, and a girl had caught the last part of their conversation. She looked at them appraisingly, and Harry tried to make his wings look as small as possible like they planned. I think Jon intends to randomly say, 'By the way, this guy is Cursed' and shock everyone. He's a sneaky one.

The girl was average height, but muscular. She had an intense, focused expression, her hair was auburn and back in a ponytail. Her wings were a surprising shade of red, and she was wearing practical clothing. She sat in a chair across the table, and folded her arms.

Jon, behaving like Jon, gave her an exaggerated wink, but she didn't respond. Harry was a bit taken aback, but was spared the uncomfortable silence by the door reopening.

It was another girl, smaller and more delicate looking, and she had a wide smile. Harry liked her immediately. She was pretty, and her long hair was woven into dozens of small braids. Her wings reminded Harry of a tawny owl, and her hair was a similar light shade of brown.

Her smile was contagious, Harry found himself smiling back. Unlike the first girl, she wore a simple but pretty dress and a belt with beads woven into it. She had small earrings sparkling on each ear. She sat at the table with a certain amount of grace.

The first girl glanced her over too, reserving judgment. "Good," she said, scooting her chair forward and sitting up straight. "Now that we're all here, we can introduce ourselves."

Jon grinned, suppressing a chuckle, squeezing Harry with the arm slung over Harry's shoulders. "I'm Jon." He said confidently.

"Harry." Harry volunteered next as they all looked at him.

"I'm Sariah," said the pretty smiling girl.

"Vosenn," was the first girl. "I do potions mostly."

"I was top in Theory, History, and non-violent techniques." Sariah shared.

"I've done a lot of escort work," Jon was saying, but the door was opening. Another boy walked in. He had a very muscular physique and confidence, he moved like a fighter.

Vosenn blinked at him. "You are?"

"Axe." The boy looked out over them, and everyone was confused for a second.

"But that makes five," Vosenn protested. "Aren't there four of us?"

"A Hand has five," Jon pointed out, removing his arm from Harry's shoulders.

"Yeah but that includes our Cursed." Axe said, still standing near the door.

"Exactly," Jon said. He gave Harry a little nudge.

Rolling his eyes, Harry shook out his wings from their cramped position, spreading them to full span. Their blackness and immense size said it all, and the three others in the room stared. Harry had made extra sure to be careful where he put them, he felt confident he could maneuver his wings around and avoid injuring anyone. Jon, sitting close to him as he moved, didn't flinch.

"You're a... Cursed?" Sariah had been sitting right next to Harry, and she involuntarily leaned away. Her voice was small and intimidated.

"Meet my buddy Harry," Jon said gleefully. Harry folded his wings back up.

The door opened. It was Iz. Jon, Sariah, Vosenn and Axe all looked surprised and awed.

"Good," Iz said. "You're all here. Take a seat young man." Axe sat down, and Iz took the last chair.

"You all know me," Iz said, and they nodded.

"He's a legend," Jon murmured to Harry.

Iz continued, "I regret you will not be graduating with the rest of your class, we're going to be moving you through early. I asked your

teachers to each pick the best students they have for a very important task."

They all looked proud and everyone smiled, even Vosenn.

"You won't be going on missions, you will have a regular assignment and be working together for some time. Let me start by explaining your assignment. Queen Aeyris has a daughter Enna who's not often acknowledged because she's not in the public eye. She has anxiety about leaving her quarters. We want to assign her a Hand that is with her at all times. We chose you because we need the best for Princess Enna, and also because you're close to her age. By having the same people around her she can build trust. She's met with Harry and approves of him, both Harry and Enna agree to this arrangement. None of you have been in a Hand before or worked with a Cursed, but you are well trained and I have confidence this will work."

Jon shot Harry a glance when Iz said that Harry had met the Princess.

"Which one of you is trained to be a leader?" Iz asked.

Vosenn sat up straight, saying, "I am."

"She will be in charge. Since we are trying to put together the best team, we also got one of the best Cursed for you as well." Iz gestured at Harry, "This is The Wild One."

"Oh Darkness!" Vosenn exclaimed, and they all looked floored, except for Jon.

Harry could feel their eyes all on him, and was embarrassed. He looked straight ahead at Iz and didn't react. I really think I dislike being famous. And being famous for being violent and escaping into the wilderness is much worse than being famous for saving the wizarding world.

"I want you all to get to know each other," Iz told them. "You need a relationship that works, so figure it out. Harry's room is on Level one of the Keep, you should find it pretty easily. It should be the only

empty one, just ask the guard, just walk him over there and hang out, or go get something to eat, it's up to you."

"Good Luck," he said, getting to his feet. "I will contact you soon." He left, leaving the door open, and they could hear his footsteps down the hall.

"Wow, dark, a princess." Jon said, and everyone nodded. He elbowed Harry, "You never told me you met the Princess!"

"Yeah, she's really nice." Harry said. "She's really pretty."

"Of course she is, Queen Aeyris is stunning!" Jon's eyes widened.

"You know each other?" Vosenn asked, eyes flicking back and forth.

"We've met twice," Jon told her. "I've escorted him around, and we always got along pretty well." Vosenn nodded approvingly.

"Should we go?" Axe asked, pointing at the open door.

They got to their feet, and walked out of the room, starting down the hallway. Jon knew the way, and so he stepped forward to lead them, leaving Harry to stand with the others. Jon turned around once and smiled, but the rest of the time he was focused on where they were walking, so the trip was silent.

Harry could tell when they reached the Keep, it was deeper and darker than where they'd been before. The air got colder.

They're nervous, I can feel it. It's making me nervous. The walls felt like they were pressing in. I hate the Keep, I really hate it!

Harry started feeling odd, a little hot, a little dizzy. He pulled at the neckline of his shirt, agitated. Sariah looked at him strangely, but they continued in silence. They reached a guard, who looked them over, and pointed to one of the first doorways. Each step toward the door was hard. Locking myself into my own prison, he thought ruefully.

Jon stopped by the door and turned, leaning against the wall to watch them walk over, opening the door and holding it for them.

Harry stopped in front of him. "Hey Jon."

"What is it, Harry?" Jon asked.

"I'm feeling a little dizzy." He said.

Jon's face looked like it was on the other end of a long, long tunnel. It looked concerned. "You need to lie down?"

Harry shrugged. I feel like I'm being fucking babysat is all. These people think I'm a freak.

"Harry," Jon's voice changed. He didn't sound like Jon anymore.  
"Your eyes..."

A hand touched his back, and Harry snapped. As everything faded away Harry could feel himself lashing out.

## Chapter Nine: Monster

Harry felt for a moment that his hands weren't his own, and he gave them a sharp glance. Behave! He turned and looked behind him, seeing a body crumpled at the base of the wall. He vaguely wondered what someone was doing down there, but they were too far away to get a good look at, everything was swimming in front of his eyes.

He noticed the way everyone was looking at him: absolute shock. Why are they looking at me like that? Why are my hands acting weird? What on Earth... on Origin is that person doing down there?

Things cleared up for a second, and he felt it might be wise to step in his room and leave these mysteries behind.

The door closed with a slam. That was rude.

When Harry woke up some time later, he was on the floor. He looked around. It was a nice room, very large. One corner had a bed and dresser, there were a couple empty shelves on the wall, and then an area with a table and five chairs. Very comfortable looking, and the bed was the nicest he'd had a chance to sleep in so far... I wonder why I chose to sleep on the floor?

The door had been solid before, but it had bars now. It must have two doors, and you can either close both or close just the bars, so you can still look in. You can make it look pretty, and try to hide the fact, but it's still a damned prison.

There was someone out there looking in on him, barely out of view, but they stepped forward toward the bars where he could see them. It was Iz.

"Hello Harry."

"Hey Iz." Harry said, getting to his feet and trying to brush some of the wrinkles out of his pants.

Iz opened the door and stepped inside, crossing his arms and looking down at Harry in that way that Harry was now familiar with.

"What is it?" Harry inquired, slightly annoyed.

"You messed up, Harry." Iz said gravely. "We're having another meeting; we need to review our plans."

"Oh," said Harry, trying to remember what he'd done.

"You can only come along if you drink this first." Iz held out a vial, and Harry looked at it distrustfully.

"What does it do?"

"It will make you feel a little slow and sluggish. Nothing particularly strong." Iz reconsidered. "Actually one of the strongest we've got, but it won't be for you. It shouldn't put you to sleep." Iz looked pointedly at Harry. "Or you could stay here."

Resignedly, Harry reached for the vial. It was small enough to drink in one gulp. He waited, and Iz watched him.

"Why is this necessary?" Harry thought to ask.

"No one wants to see you at all right now, and it would make them feel much better, in my experience, if you have difficulty coordinating walking," Iz said matter-of-factly. "And also because I want this meeting to have a favorable outcome, and if this gets you a pity vote then it's worth the discomfort." He sighed. "Why did you have to complicate things, Harry?"

Two of the men in dark blue, Keepers, came into the room on either side of Harry, lifting him up and propping him on his feet. "Let's go," one of them said, and they started forward. Each step became harder and harder as Harry became more and more dizzy. It made him extremely uneasy, as it reminded him of before, when he'd felt out of control. The complete memory leaped into Harry's mind, and his heart sank. What did I do?

Eventually they got to a large door, and it opened into a long room with several rows of tables. The table closest to the door was empty, it was this table they marched him too, supporting him from either

side. His legs gave out in relief as he sat in a chair, and he laid his head down on the table, tired. Folding his arms and placing his chin on top he looked lazily at the next table, eyes half open, slumped over the table. Several faces jumped out at him: The Queen, Natan, who was sitting next to Jon, and Iz, as he took an empty seat next to the Queen. He also noticed Sariah looking at him with panic, but the other people in the room were all a blur.

"Calm yourselves, he can't hurt you." Iz said soothingly.

"How is he?" The Queen asked.

"Confused." Iz said. "Now we need to address the question of what to do next. We should have been prepared for this, but we weren't. I know from my work with Cursed Silents that the ones that are particularly powerful are always more prone to violent episodes than the others, and Harry is definitely that. I wasn't expecting him to immediately react to his Hand as he did, and I want to determine what happened."

"We were walking Harry to his room as you requested," Vosenn said. "When we got to his room he was looking at us strangely, and he told Jon he didn't feel right, and we were concerned. Axe was standing behind him, and without turning around Harry flung him back into the wall of the hallway. The force split his head open. Axe is now dying."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Iz said. "He's not dead yet."

"But he soon will be" Vosenn told him bitterly. "Healers can rebuild bodies to a certain extent, but they can't do anything about brain damage."

Oh no... Harry thought.

"The fact," Natan said directly and only to the Queen, "is that their confidence is irreversibly damaged, and we might as well send them home to their families. This arrangement should be called off, the result was failure. Harry needs to be locked up deep in the Keep. He's simply too dangerous."

His bluntness stunned them into silence. Harry was trying to mash his face into the table and hopefully disappear. They all looked at him, and he peered blearily back.

"Hold on just a second," Jon argued. "Don't judge us, don't discount us like that."

"That's right." Sariah said, surprising everyone. She'd been silent up until that point.

"Don't lie to yourselves." Natan said harshly. "It's too late now."

"No!" Vosenn insisted.

"So you're willing to try again?" Iz asked. Jon, Sariah and Vosenn nodded. Harry was surprised, from their faces so were Natan and the Queen. Iz looked pleased.

Why do they want me? Natan is right, maybe I should be locked away.

"Thanks, friend." Iz said quietly to Natan, who looked as if uncomprehending. "We need to find what caused the problem; this is why I've brought Harry." One of the Keepers nudged Harry, who lifted his head.

"Harry," Iz asked gently, "What upset you? Did Axe do something?"

Harry thought fuzzily. "He touched me," he said conclusively.

"Touched you?" The Queen asked.

"But I touch Harry all the time." Jon protested.

"That's right," Vosenn agreed, nodding. "Jon would have his arm over Harry's shoulders, even."

Natan raised his eyebrows at Jon.

"We were joking around." Jon told them.

"Exactly." Harry mumbled. They all looked back over to him.

"I see." Sariah said. "Jon treats him like a friend. Axe treated him..."

"Like a freak," Harry completed.

Iz nodded. "There lies the problem. Harry doesn't want to be feared. Now that we know what set him off, we can try to avoid the problem from happening in the future. Here's the plan; we will delay our plans for a couple days, and I want you all to spend time with Harry until you've built some trust." The Queen nodded in agreement to this. "And we're going to need a fifth person for the Hand."

"I'll trust you to find someone," The Queen said. Natan looked disgusted, but everyone else nodded.

Harry was alert and feeling sorry for himself in his room later that day. He'd figured out how to reach through the bars and find the solid second door, and shut it. No one had bothered him.

There came a knock. With a sigh, Harry walked over to the door and reached through to the second door, pushing it open slightly. "Yes?" I'm not in the mood to be bothered, but if they can respect me enough to knock, then I'll give them a minute.

"It's me!" It was Gray, who pulled the door slightly further open and grinned to see Harry.

"Gray! Come in! Can you come in?" Harry asked ruefully.

"Yeah, the guard is going to let me in. I've brought a couple more visitors with me, is that okay?"

"Sure."

The door was unlocked by the guard from the hall, who glared at Harry. Must have ruined his day to have someone killed on his shift.

Gray stepped in. "Ren, Mom and Dad say hello, and they hope you're well."

"How are they?" Harry asked. "Any news about Alexander?"

"No, none. We're upset you were taken from us, but we can't directly argue the Queen's wishes." Gray held the door open behind him, and Harry watched to see who his visitors were.

First entered a tall, dark haired woman with deep brown wings Harry had never seen before. On second thought, she looks a little familiar.

The woman was looking him over carefully, but as she and Gray went to take seats at Harry's table two younger women came hand in hand through the door and Harry turned his attention to them.

"Kahd!" He exclaimed, recognizing the blond Healer. The one holding her hand was actually quite a bit younger, and she looked at Harry with wide eyes. Her wings were tucked in stiffly, nervously.

"Hello Harry," Kahd said, and surprised him with a hug. Harry hugged her back gratefully. "This is Phia," she added. "You've met."

"We have?" Harry asked, looking at the girl.

"Sorry," Phia said.

"What are you apologizing for?" Harry wanted to know, very curious now. Maybe I have seen her before.

"When you were free, they found you because of me," she explained. "I didn't mean to. You saved my life. But I was so scared."

Harry finally understood. '... They searched everywhere, couldn't find any trace of you. Finally you were spotted by a young girl who was able to point the search parties in the direction of your whereabouts.'

"You're the one who saw me," Harry said, and she nodded. "It's okay, I'm not angry. What do you mean, I saved you life?" He gestured for them to sit down, and they all sat around the table.

"This is odd," Phia confessed. "I've thought a lot about you, and in my head you've always been... as you were. Now we're standing here,

having a normal conversation." She took a deep breath. "Nesie—that's my little sister—and I were exploring. We're really not supposed to go as far as we did, but I didn't care and I almost got me and my sister killed. We were attacked by a Bloodbeast, and it was about to eat us when you appeared out of nowhere and attacked it. You fought it and won, and it ran away. Then you left."

"She came to the Keep when she heard you'd been captured," Kahd told him." She's a brave girl. They directed her to me. I guess we figured out the mystery of the claw."

Phia reached into a pocket of her dress, and pulled out the big wickedly curved claw Kahd had removed from Harry's mouth.

"You must have bitten this off the Bloodbeast in the fight," Kahd said with a warm smile. "You left it with me, and I showed it to Phia."

Phia offered it him and he took it to get a closer look. It was silver in tone, hard and extremely sharp. A cord had been woven around the base of the claw to hold it securely, attaching it to large loop. "I made that, if you want to wear it," Phia said shyly.

"Thank you," Harry said honestly. "I think I will."

"I wanted to let you know," Phia added. "That when you were... you know... you nodded at me. Like you saw me and had saved me on purpose. You must have done it on purpose. I think that even under the circumstances you saw I was in trouble and rescued me."

Harry was slightly stunned. I sure hope so. That would be excellent.  
"So there's hope for me yet?"

Everyone smiled.

Phia got to her feet. "I'll go now. Thank you... for being my champion." She blushed, and Kahd stood and took her hand again.

"I'll walk you out," She offered, and Phia nodded gratefully.

"Goodbye Phia, and Kahd." Harry waved as they left.

"Goodbye Wild One." Phia said.

"Hopefully we'll meet again sometime," Kahd added, shutting the door.

Gray smiled at Harry. "See Harry? Not everyone thinks you're a monster." He winked. "Will you stop sulking now?"

Harry laughed. "Thank you Gray." He gave Gray a playful push, who pushed him back.

"Boys, behave." The woman said with a smile. Harry had forgotten she was there for a second, and looked at her, surprised.

"A joke?" Gray asked, surprised, but for a different reason. "From you?"

"I'm not as boring as you think I am, Gray." She said.

"Harry, this is aunt Madalena, our fathers' older sister. She wasn't around to visit because she works directly with the Queen, and we didn't want to tell her we had you."

Harry was now glad the woman was here. More family!

"I was always much older than my two younger brothers, we never had quite the same relationship," Madalena explained to Harry. "I was always very much involved in my work. I do major spells and magic for the Queen."

"She's one of the most powerful and talented clanspeople," Gray said proudly.

"Of course I wanted to meet my nephew." Madalena gave him a smile, and touched his hand. "I must say, I'm rather pleased. If you're going to be a Cursed, you might as well do it right, and you've made quite a name for yourself."

"The Wild One?" Harry offered.

"Yes, quite interesting."

"I know where I've seen you," Harry realized suddenly. "When I was first presented to the Queen in her Hall, you were sitting up near the throne." I noticed her because while everyone was looking scandalized, she simply watched me closely.

"That's right. You're very observant." Madalena nodded. "I've got something else for you here, something Kahd gave me." She handed something to Harry, a small soft pouch. Inside, something was hard and round.

He opened it and reach in, and his fingertips tingled slightly as he lifted the contents out. It was the ugly rock on the chain, and as the tingling started to irritate him he dropped it back inside.

"I made that," Madalena said. "And gave it to your mother. She came to me shortly after you were born. Babies are born with small fuzzy wings without much color and no one had yet realized what you were. No one really considered it you could be Cursed because your mother was human and not a Silent. But somehow your mother knew. Later young Alexander proved to be Cursed, and that's when people realized you might be as well. However your parents had already left with you and you couldn't be examined or taken into custody. When your mother first came to me she wanted a way to not only hide who you were, but suppress your nature. It worked, but only barely. It wouldn't work under any other circumstances, or for anyone else here in the Keep. It worked because you weren't in your true form, because you didn't know who you were, nor were you surrounded by this particular society. So you looked human, and had no reason to know or act differently. Your own mind made the spell engage. It can still hide you very well, so I want you to keep it, and I think if you were off Origin it would work much as before. I put it into a bag that will block its effects from you so you can carry it safely."

Harry was impressed. "Thank you." I've had the life I've had because of her. Still, when she said I wasn't 'in my true form'... what I am was a lie the whole time.

"We've got some good news!" Gray said brightly. "And we came early to tell you to be discreet. I'm going to be part of your Hand."

"What?" Harry asked. "Really? That's great!" That was unexpected.

"But you can't tell anyone I'm your cousin, or that I have a casting stone. People would know I didn't go to the Academy and be upset. And having a family member in your Hand is strongly frowned upon. It was Iz's idea, he thought it would make you more comfortable."

"Of course it will." Harry couldn't help grinning. I'd give anything to spend more time with any of my family.

"One last thing," Madalena said. "You'll find that you're cooler without a shirt on, but hide your casting stone in the bag. Tie the bag to your belt, I've spelled it so that it can't be lost and no one can take it from you. The Queen doesn't know you have a casting stone, and they would probably try to take it from you."

Harry nodded, the wondered, "I thought you work for the Queen?"

Madalena smiled. "I work for myself. I listen to the Queen most of the time, she's a good ruler, but still young. She takes my advice, which I respect, but family loyalty comes first."

"I have to go meet the rest of the Hand now," Gray said.

"And I think I'll go visit dear Amanda and Lexian, they must be distraught about Alexander," Madalena got to her feet. "I'm glad to have finally met you, nephew." She clasped his Harry's hand.

"I'm glad too." Harry said. Madalena left quietly.

"Oh, wait," Gray said suddenly, pulling a sack off his shoulder. "I brought you gifts."

"Gifts?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Survival supplies," Gray said seriously. "This room is too empty."

Gray put the sack down on the table. "Here. Some really cool embroidered pants, those are from Ren, and a belt, that's from my dad. It's got nice stones on it. Mom sent some food, and there's a couple books from me."

Harry looked over his gifts, grinning. "This is wonderful! Tell everyone thank you. Which books did you bring?"

Gray picked them up. "I dug around until I found 'The Book of Earth', I thought you might find it interesting. I got you a copy of 'Legends of Origin'. Neither of those were written by Silents, so they have a more worldly perspective. And the last one is big book of spells you can learn and practice with your casting stone, it was written by Madalena, it's a great book."

"Thanks, Gray." They hugged, and Harry was still smiling after Gray left.

The first thing he did was change into his new pants, they fit snugly around the waist, then down his legs loose enough for him to move easily. He took off his shirt and removed his casting stone, cupping it in his hands for a second, marveling at its beauty before tucking it into the small pouch. He put the belt through the loops on the pouch and put the belt on. He replaced his casting stone with the neatly woven cord that held the claw. He felt confident in his new attire.

Glancing around, he noticed something dark on the far side of the room, and went over to take a look. It was a large shiny piece of rock, polished enough to reflect and use as a mirror. Harry casually wandered over to check out his new pants, and was dumbfounded by what he saw. He stared in shock.

I didn't expect to have changed so much. The pants looked good, but what caught his attention was that he had grown some over the summer, also his torso was muscular. I must have been running around nonstop the entire time I was free on Origin. I'd forgotten about all the time that passed when I wasn't aware of it.

More than that, his eyes were haunted. I've killed people. I've been held captive and treated like a monster.

The polished rock was so dark that his wings barely showed up, but their sleek shine reflected, glittering in the air behind him. He moved them, feeling their power, watching how his shoulder muscles flexed in response. He stood another minute staring and taking in his new appearance. My face looks so different without my glasses. I've barely noticed them gone since I woke up in the holding cell.

Finally he was unable to look anymore, and went to clean away his things into his dresser.

Remembering his books, Harry grabbed them and took them to his bed where sprawled comfortably on his stomach to read.

## The Book of EARTH

Origin was the first world created. Earth was the ninth, and although there are worlds older and larger, Earth is sometimes called the little sister planet of Origin. This is because none of the other planets have had the amount of trade and interaction with Origin as Earth. The significance of Earth comes from the dense population which boasts some of the most diverse creatures and peoples of all the worlds, second only to Origin itself.

Earth is the sole creation of the Goddess known as The Green Lady, also Mother Earth. Origin was experiencing a particularly turbulent period of history in which most of the races were hostile and fighting all the time. The Green Lady, the Goddess of Peace, Harmony, and Nature, was distressed by this. She believed that all the hostility stemmed from their great differences. She then created a new world, little more than half the size of Origin, and called it Earth. She created a new race for this planet, and called them Humans. She wanted to bring peace to this new planet by eliminating the differences of the races. Humans had neither scales nor feathers, leaves, hooves, claws, or even much fur. The planet was also inhabited by many small creatures not equal in intelligence to the Humans, and was modeled after Origin itself.

Keeping Earth separate from the other planets would have been akin to locking a small child in a dark room, so immediately portals were established and Earth became part of the large circle of interconnected worlds. Earth became home to many creatures not created there. Wrath, the God of Destruction, had made a very large planet home to violent creatures called dragons, and many dragons came to Earth, along with unicorns made by MindRuin, Goddess of Light, Sphinxes and more from many of the new worlds. Earth drew crowds from Origin as well. Many from Origin's five races came: Centaurs, Vineadryads, Cylants, Bloodbeasts, and the Mer. Humans also traveled and a large number moved to Origin.

Early in Earth's history the Humans lived beside these creatures from other worlds, but at some point the Humans had a change of heart,

and exhibited violence toward the others. They hunted the dragons and killed them, and many of the otherworld creatures felt unwelcome. Many of the portals were shut down, and few new ones open today. Those Otherworldly left on Earth have evolved and changed from their original forms, though they still resemble their off-Earth cousins. Some became extinct, and most exist only in small numbers.

Earth's history contains much mention of Gods and otherworld creatures. The ancient Greeks revered the Centaurs, who have always been keepers of knowledge, and in return the Centaurs gave them the stories of the Gods. The Greek Myths were often exaggerated, but they contained much relevance and hidden truths. They spoke of the Centaurs, dryads, and Merpeople. Egypt also wrote of sphinxes and others.

Many Humans still loved their Mother Earth, and she loved them as well, but the race as a whole was a disappointment to The Green Lady. She gave birth to a son, who now watches over Earth as she returns to Origin to be with the other Gods and her Vineadryad race. The Vineadryads were successfully peaceful. In a bizarre twist of irony, the father of her son was Wrath, God of War. The two simply weren't meant to be together, but a short relationship between Wrath and the Green Lady resulted in the one we call The Double-Sided God. The Double-Sided God is torn between peace and war and is always leading Humanity in two different directions. He is well suited for his task as he is a reflection of the two sides of human nature.

On Origin, a section of the human population made a migration home. They'd only lived on Origin for a few generations, and they remembered their roots through stories and decided that Earth was their rightful homeland. Many humans could not comprehend leaving their new home of Origin and stayed. On Origin they were first viewed as a strange raceless and godless people, to the other races they had a lack of identity, and were simply a blank slate, leftovers not yet infused with souls. After a few generations they became established as a new race, and accepted, although the humans and the other races have never had a strong rapport. They interact, but the humans are generally full of fear and distrust. There are exceptions; the outer limits of the human territories often make friends with other races

nearby, and the big City the humans built has become a center of trade.

Something strange happened to the humans that returned to Earth through the portals. A great number of the women had been pregnant, and as their children progressed through life they exhibited strange abilities. Something had changed these children in the womb, and it was due to traveling in the portals. Once adults, these gifted humans developed their powers and learned how to best use them. They gave themselves a name: wizards, or witches if female. Their offspring were born with the same abilities, and since then there has always been a number of wizards among the regular humans. Non-magical humans felt threatened by these strange powers, and just like the off-world creatures they were unwelcome. Many wizards were killed by non-magical humans in the Dark Ages, but the non-magical humans had no concept of just how many wizards there were, and because the non-magical humans believed they had all been killed the wizards slipped into anonymity. Today they have again grown in number and live in a vast secret society within that of the other humans. For more on the fascinating study of Earth Wizards, see chapter three. Their society is very complex, and their ingenuity in avoiding recognition by those they call "muggles" or non-magical humans is impressive. In an interesting phenomenon called "muggle-born" wizards, if a pregnant non-magical human is nearby when a portal opens her baby will one day become a wizard or witch.

Humans in the City on Origin, where portals to Earth are created, have powers as well, although they are not as focused as with the wizards and witches on Earth. In rural human territories no such powers exist. The human City...

## Legends of Origin

### Introduction: An Overview of the Gods and the Five Races

Wrath is the God of Destruction, and also the god of war, and he's associated with the color red. He has a son, the Double-Sided God, who is the protector God of Earth and Humanity. He also has a daughter, Luscious, the Goddess of Fire and Sex. His race are the

Bloodbeasts. They live on the deserts of Origin; they have fur, sharp teeth, and wicked claws, and are large in stature. They are a violent and hungry species. They live in tribes under the command of chiefs, but all the tribes are all ruled by the Chief-King.

The Green Lady is the Goddess of Nature. She is also considered the Goddess of peace, harmony, childbirth, and is associated with the color green. She is the mother of the planet Earth, and also the mother of the Double-Sided God. Her race are the Vineadryads, peaceful people who live in the forests of Origin.

Dark-Eyes is the God of Darkness, he's associated with the color blue. His people are the Cylants, winged people from the mountains of Origin. He's also the creator of the portal-guides. The Cylants are the most mysterious of the races and due to this over time have come to be called the Silents.

MindRuin is the Goddess of Light. She's also the goddess of beauty, she is associated with the color purple. Her true name is unknown, she is called MindRuin as a way of warning. She is said to be so incredibly beautiful that all who look upon her are blinded and go mad. She has one daughter, the Goddess of Love. She created the Mer, people with fins and gills who live in the oceans of Origin. They are a beautiful and peaceful people.

The Hermit God is the God of Knowledge, he is associated with the color gray. He is also the god of history, and past. His people are the Centaurs, keepers of knowledge. They have four strong legs and run very fast; they live in the fields and hills of Origin. There is long standing hostility between the Centaurs and the Bloodbeasts. They are fairly solitary and live in lone family dwellings.

Intuition is the Goddess of Mystery. She's the goddess of future, and associated with the color white. She chose not to create a race.

The Gods all have many demi-gods who work beneath them. The Gods are paired into opposites; Wrath, the God of War, is the opposite of The Green Lady. Dark Eyes, God of Darkness, is the opposite of MindRuin, Goddess of Light. The Hermit God, God of Knowledge, is the opposite of Intuition, Goddess of Mystery.

Interestingly, an attraction exists between these opposites. Wrath and The Green Lady had a short time together in which they had a son, also, Dark Eyes and MindRuin are said to have a long, turbulent, off and on relationship.

The Five Races are called thus because they were the five races immediately created upon the creation of Origin, and therefore the most ancient of all races. Many other races exist, and the five races are no longer the only ones who call Origin home.

Magic has always been part of Origin's people. The Cylants, the Vineadryads, and the Mer are the three magical races. It is possible that the other two races have magic but if so it lies undiscovered. The Bloodbeasts have no use for magic, only force, and the Centaurs value practicality and logic over all else. Among the Cylants there appear to be a number who have developed magic using "casting stones," smooth pebbles that best conduct the magic within them. There are those among the Vineadryads with the power to influence nature directly, and the responsibility to watch over it. They can grow trees and flowers by their voices alone.

The Goddess of Mystery had a friendship with MindRuin, and Intuition left a single lasting mark upon the races, in a gift she gave to the Mer. She gave some of the merpeople the sight, an ability to see into the future...

## Chapter 11: The Test

Harry sat in his cell with Madalena's spell-book open on his lap and his casting stone in one hand, concentrating. These spells come really easy... they seem more intuitive than taught; you only have to nudge the magic in the right direction. His casting stone felt like it was humming slightly in his hand. Unfortunately I've only learned the little spells, and the walls here are impenetrable, or I would be gone.

Someone knocked on the door, and Harry sighed. He closed the spell-book, put it on his shelf with his other books, and tucked his casting stone into the pouch on his belt. He walked over to the door, asking, "Who is it?"

"It's us." Jon said, "Can we come in?"

That's brave of them, Harry thought. I didn't think they'd come in here so soon.

"Of course," he replied. The doors were both opened, and Jon stepped in.

"We brought someone to meet you," Jon said, and in stepped Vosenn, Sariah, and Gray. "This is Gray, he will be replacing Axe." Harry couldn't help noticing how Jon winced slightly at Axe's name.

"Nice to meet you," Harry greeted Gray with a straight face.

"Likewise," said Gray. Just like when Harry had first met Gray, the resemblance wasn't apparent unless you were aware of it. "Nice pants," Gray added.

"Wow, they're really dark!" Sariah said.

"Take a seat," Harry said, moving to the table, and everyone joined him. The table is getting good use, at least my cell has one.

"What's that?" Sariah asked, pointing to his chest.

Harry looked down. "A bloodbeast claw," he said. "They dug it out of my jaw after I was recaptured, I bit it off in a fight."

"... Oh." Sariah said. " I'd forgotten about all that."

There was a couple seconds of silence, and Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"So here's the plan," Vosenn said, and everyone looked to her. "I think that we need to just touch base and get in sync with each other's abilities and plan what to do in certain situations. If Harry doesn't mind..." she looked to him, "we can meet here and have meetings and study our Academy books when we need to. That way Harry can be in on everything that's going on so he knows what to expect."

Harry nodded. "I don't mind at all, you're always welcome."

"Sounds good," Jon said, "besides the studying part. I brought a game."

Vosenn raised her eyebrows at him, a very Vosenn-like look. "Okay. You can play your...game... if you'd like, this time." Vosenn had this calm collectedness about her that made everyone instinctively listen.

Jon grinned and dug into his pockets, pulling out a couple handfuls of pebbles. "It's called Race War."

"Oh I know this one," Gray said, leaning forward.

"How do you play?" Sariah asked.

"The rocks have different markings on them." Jon explained. Harry picked one up to take a closer look. "The swirl means Silents, the wave is Mer, the hoof-print is Centaur. The five parallel lines means Bloodbeasts, I think it's supposed to be claw scratches. The leaf is Vineadryad, and the ones without any markings are Humans of course. There are equal numbers of each, we mix them all up in the middle and split them evenly. Everyone has a pile of mixed markings, you get what you get. We sit in a circle just as we are now, and each pick one pebble to move to the center of the table to fight the other

people. Each race pebble can do different things to the other pebbles..."

Vosenn sighed dramatically and leaned forward on her elbows to pay attention.

An hour later, they were still playing, Sariah had lost her pebbles in the war almost immediately, and was leaning back in her seat lazily watching them and playing with her hair. The game had gotten down to a routine where they could talk and play at the same time.

Jon had been telling a particularly funny story about running around the Queen's Hall when he was a little boy tripping anyone who looked important. When it wound to a close and everyone was smiling to themselves, Jon broke the silence. Thoughtfully, he said, "People keep challenging you Harry, you know."

Vosenn glared at Jon like Harry had never seen, and Sariah gasped. "Hush!" she said.

Gray looked darkly at Jon, who shrugged innocently. "What?"

"He doesn't need to know about all that," Vosenn told him.

Harry, who had sat up very straight all of a sudden, paying attention, demanded, "Don't tell me what? It's too late now Vosenn." That can't be good. Not another thing!

"Well down in the Keep at least, you're pretty famous," Jon explained, "And there are some Hands who could conveniently steal that glory by fighting you and winning."

"... they DO that here?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Yes." Vosenn said. "I've never been fond of it, myself."

"I don't want to hear any more about it," Sariah announced. "It's barbaric, and counterproductive."

That was that, and over the next few days Harry forgot all about it. His Hand came by frequently, and the tension eased until Harry could feel a real friendship between them. On the one side Jon was always joking around, and on the other Vosenn was trying her hardest to get them to stay focused. Both of them succeeded, because they seemed to have fun and get things done at the same time. Gray was usually quiet, but when he had something to say it was always of value and everyone stopped to listen. Sariah was gentle and happy. They talked a lot about what they had learned in the Academy, which Harry found fascinating.

One occasion Jon was late, and when he came in his face was grim, surprising everyone. "Bad news," he said.

"What?" Sariah asked, alarmed.

"The Queen made an announcement in her Hall today, that she will be leaving for diplomatic relations for a short time, and that she will be taking her daughter. Everyone was surprised to hear her daughter mentioned, but they were interested to hear that The Wild One would be accompanying them for safety. People talked about it for a while, and then they requested a discussion. First someone asked whether it was safe enough with you, you being new and only recently being assigned a Hand. Then they mentioned the rumors that you hadn't responded to any challenges, and someone requested that you prove yourself. Everyone else took that up and soon everyone was insisting to see a demonstration of your ability."

"She can't possibly consider that," Gray said.

"Then the Queen kind of smirked," Jon continued, "And said, 'Sure, why not, I've been wondering what he's capable of myself.'"

"No way," Vosenn insisted, face grim.

"Yes way," Jon affirmed.

"But that's not fair!" Sariah protested. "We've only been together for a couple days, and there aren't any other new Hands because this

years students at the Academy haven't graduated yet, so we would be up against someone way more experienced."

Everyone looked at Harry, to see what he would say.

"What's involved?" He asked.

"You just fight another Cursed, and then when there's a clear winner the Hands have to subdue their Cursed and bring them back to the Keep," Vosenn explained. "Cursed don't get hurt very easily, and the Healers can fix just about anything, so it's brutal but there's usually no permanent injuries."

"So... I'm taking it we don't have a choice," Harry finally said.

"No. We don't." Jon said honestly.

Harry crossed his arms tightly, turning away from them. "Sariah was right. That is barbaric. How can they do that to me?" He fumed.

Sariah lightly touched his shoulders, rubbing them. "It'll be okay Harry."

"If you lose then people will just say it wasn't fair to put you up against someone older," Jon said. "At least I hope so."

Sariah continued rubbing his shoulders and Harry relaxed.

"Do you want us to leave?" Gray asked quietly.

"No," Harry said, taking a seat. "I'm fine." They have good reason to be wary, I suppose.

"Can I braid your hair into little braids, like mine?" Sariah asked, grinning. "Your hair's grown out a little, it would look really dark."

"Alright," he said. If it makes her happy.

"I could put some of your feathers into them," she suggested. "Have you lost any recently?"

"Yeah, there's a small pile I shoved next to my bed."

Sariah walked over to look, carefully picking them up. "Be careful with them Harry, they're valuable," she said.

"Really?" Interesting to know.

"Yeah," Jon affirmed, "Because they're so sharp. They cut like nothing else."

"So when's the fight?" Gray asked him.

Jon sighed. "Tomorrow morning."

Vosenn put her head in her hands. Realizing everyone was looking at her, she sat up straight. "Alright everyone, we can do this. Most of it will be Harry, and Harry you don't really have to try or worry about it it's out of your hands. And the rest of us we need to have a plan for when the fight is done. That's exactly the same kind of strategy we've been going over."

"It's going to be bizarre to watch, though," Jon pointed out.

Harry closed his eyes as Sariah ran her fingers through his hair, untangling and separating it. "I'm not looking forward to this," he stated.

Harry had taken a liking to sleeping late, and was disgruntled by the knock in the morning. He found himself wide awake suddenly as he remembered what was going to happen.

It was Vosenn and Sariah. "Good morning Harry." They both said, neither looking very pleased. Sariah was sad and Vosenn was irritated. They tried to hide it from him, but Harry could tell.

Vosenn had something folded over her arm, and she held it up, it was a pair of bright red slacks.

"Not exactly my style," Harry said, and they smiled.

"Normally Cursed wear black, as you know, but I suppose this would be considered a special occasion," Vosenn said. They turned around, and Harry changed into them.

"Done," he said. They turned around, and Sariah held something up, it was a small metal box.

"Red paint," she told him. She opened the lid and stuck her finger in it, and traced a large symbol over Harry's chest.

"Okay..." Harry said. I really don't think I like this look. Sariah shrugged. When she was done he went over to take a look at his reflection. His hair looked good, Sariah was right about that, and the feathers braided into it moved interestingly when he turned his head. The loose pants and symbol were both the same shade of blood red.

"I can probably guess what the symbol says." He told them.

"It means Cursed." Vosenn twisted her lips.

"Fine. Whatever." Harry said bitterly, and they looked embarrassed. Since they'd entered the room, the atmosphere had been strained and awkward.

"Harry if it were up to us-" Sariah started, but Harry interrupted, shaking his head.

"Yes I know."

"Do you want me to get you some food?" Vosenn asked. "It would be good if you ate something."

"No. I'm not hungry." I'm just a little distracted right now.

"Hey, we're here!" Jon called through the door. "Should we come in?"

"No, we're done." Vosenn replied. "We might as well go."

Jon pushed the door open and Harry stepped out for the first time in the last couple days. The long dark hall was only a little bit less oppressive than the cell, but still he reveled in the change of scenery. That's so depressing... I want out of here. I wish I were back in Hogwarts. He felt miserable, especially about what was to come. At least I'll get even more change of scenery, He thought. That's something.

They walked down the hall to the other end that Harry entered and up a short flight of stairs onto a landing with another door to the right, and a dark opening right again. Harry realized what it was and felt a chill. That's one of the doors I saw when I first arrived in the Pit. I remember I had a bad feeling about them... now I know why.

Harry wasn't sure if this was the same door he and the Queen had stood next to, but he could almost see himself, like a ghost, looking in where he now stood. He wouldn't have recognized the Harry he was now.

They walked to the dark opening. When they said 'the top layers of the Keep', they really meant it. I was close to the Surface; it was right above my head. That thought only increased Harry's longing to be free. So close, but so far away.

"Whoa," he said, stopping momentarily.

"Yeah!" Jon agreed, and they all stood in the doorway, looking out in wonder.

The bottom of the pit had been transformed from an empty bleak wasteland into... something else. There were a couple hundred Silents standing around a large red circle drawn in on the ground. Searching the crowd, Harry found the faces of Natan and the Queen. Enna of course wasn't there, Harry wondered what she would think of this, and had the feeling she'd disapprove.

The Queen saw him and smiled, but Harry didn't return it. You're the reason I'm here. This is your corrupted system. Don't smile at me like we're friends you set this up. Harry wanted to march over and have a

few choice words with her, but she was surrounded by the crowd and Harry knew he'd never be allowed to approach her. Harry glared.

Gray chuckled. "I saw that look you just gave the Queen... nice, Harry." He glanced at the others, who weren't paying much attention. "My little sister wanted to come watch, just to see you," he said. "But I told her not to."

"Good," Harry said just as softly. His apprehension was becoming overwhelming. Everything is too far out of my hands; I can't control my own life anymore. I know I don't have to worry about what to do in this fight, but... this is the first time I KNOW I'm going to be... leaving my head, so to speak. This is the first time it's going to be intentional. This shook him deeply. Who am I? Is this part of my life now, will it always be?

Together, Harry and his friends moved forward. Overall the crowd was still, but they reacted to his presence by murmuring to each other, and there were a few scattered cheers. Harry felt the symbol on his chest screaming his identity, and wished he could just wipe it off. They approached the edge of the red circle, and Harry tried to take a closer look but couldn't tell how it was made. It didn't look like paint; it looked more as if the ground had simply turned bright red in a band two inches across that formed a perfect circle. It was much bigger than it had looked from the doorway of the Keep.

They stepped into the circle. Looking up again, Harry saw Madalena approaching them. She winked at Harry. "This circle is magically enforced, once I activate it, you will be unable to leave its interior," she explained.

Harry nodded. "Alright."

Madalena pulled a casting stone from the front of her dress, and held it to her hand. It was large and bright purple, and the inside swirled opaquely like marble. She gripped it in one hand, and the other she held up in front of Harry, not touching him. Harry jumped. It felt like the symbol on his chest was being traced over by an icy finger. It flashed once, and Harry blinked, surprised.

"Try it," she said. Harry turned and held his palm out in front of him, but when he reached where the red line was, there was an unseen wall. Madalena smiled, winked at him again, and turned to leave. Vosenn, Jon, Gray and Sariah stepped easily over the same red line, no obstruction.

"Neat trick," Harry said, and they all nodded agreement, impressed.

"This is... kind of dark," Jon said. "There are a lot of people here, not just the people from the Hall. Look there are some people from the Academy, and they're pointing at us. Ha. I'll bet they're jealous."

Another murmur went through the crowd, and Harry looked to see another figure in red pants step out of a doorway on the far side of the Pit. Like Harry, he was accompanied by four individuals. They moved closer, and the crowd parted wide for them to pass. Harry's stomach dropped slightly; the other Cursed was older, and battle-scarred.

It was odd seeing another Cursed. Harry had come to take it for granted that he was different than the others, wings larger and black, and everyone had a respect for his strength and abilities. Here was another like him.

The other Cursed was stepping closer. Harry turned his head away, seeing Madalena walk toward the other side of the circle. Instead, he turned around to look at his friends, right in front of him but out of reach. Jon reached through the barrier and they clasped hands, and the others followed suit.

"Try and have fun with it," Jon suggested.

"Sure. Insanity, joy!" Harry said sarcastically. They laughed a bit uneasily.

"Silence!" The Queen said, and Harry turned to see her get to her feet. "The circle has been made secure. All may be assured of their safety. Now let the fight, Hadar against The Wild One, commence."

My name is Harry, he thought, annoyed. He looked across the circle. On the far side, Hadar smirked at him and moved forward. He had a scar through his eyebrow, a gap where the hair had never grown back, and an intense expression. He was taller and bulkier than Harry, and Harry felt that he was lumbering toward him.

“Ugly.” Jon murmured, and Sariah giggled. Harry glanced in their direction, and they backed up a step. “Your eyes are glowing,” Jon told him.

“Here goes,” Harry said, but he thought maybe he growled, he couldn’t be sure.

Harry turned back to Hadar and decided that he would go meet him in the middle instead of standing off to the side and let Hadar cross all of the circle. Harry looked him in the face, and was surprised to see Hadar’s eyes burned with a flickering light. That must be what I look like.

Hadar bared his teeth, and suddenly Harry was caught up in an adrenaline rush. He crouched slightly, and in the next split second Hadar closed the gap between them and jumped at Harry. Before he could knock Harry over, Harry struck at his face which made Hadar pause. While he was pausing, Harry did a vicious kick to one of Hadar’s knees. Completely infuriated now, Harry could see all thought vanish from Hadar’s glowing eyes and Hadar became a moving storm of black feathers as he flapped into the air and descended on Harry.

SHIT.

Harry felt a razor sharp edge cut into his shoulder. I thought I wouldn’t be feeling this... it’s like I’m on the way out, but not gone yet. It feels like I’m not controlling my movements anymore. A disconnect between me and what I’m doing. It was like that when I... when Axe... Harry tried to avoid visualizing that incident. When my hands weren’t behaving.

Harry ducked away from the edges of Hadar’s wings and then leaped up again tackling Hadar’s legs and bringing him back down to the

ground hard. The jarring impact seemed to knock all coherent thought from Harry's head, and everything blurred away.

## Chapter 12: Backtrack

There was a certain point when Harry realized he was becoming aware, but before that the change had been so gradual that it was hard to tell when it started. Things were moving in flashes before his eyes so fast that he could hardly follow.

Is the fight still going on? He wondered. Hadar came into focus, circling him, the look on his face one of savage fury. It is!

His face was stinging, Harry could tell time had passed and he'd missed a lot of the fight.

Hadar went to cut Harry with his wingtips, but Harry instinctively blocked it and moved forward, Hadar kneed Harry in the chest and when Harry bent over the pain he tried to grab a handful of Harry's hair. Hadar let go and howled, and Harry could see his hand was cut deeply. The feathers in my hair do more than just look nice. Thanks, Sariah...

Hadar went back to circling, and Harry could see he was limping, favoring the knee Harry had taken out in the first minute of the fight. Everything in Harry screamed to go for the throat, to rip at it and take down the one as arrogant as to attack him.

No, he thought insistently. You can do that later, go for the knee. The knee.

At first he thought it wasn't working, as he went to attack same as before, but when Hadar went to counter Harry's movements Harry found his leg lashing out during his opponent's distraction. It hit Hadar square in the kneecap, who, howling again, backed away from Harry to get his balance. He wasn't incapacitated yet, but his limp was much worse. Spitting mad, Hadar stumbled toward Harry. Harry let him come, crouched, waiting. At the last second, Harry kicked again hitting the same spot. Hadar's knee gave out, bending in the wrong direction, clearly very broken.

I kicked him really hard, but it barely slowed him down, Harry reasoned, it was only by picking at that weakness that I managed to take him down.

Harry hadn't considered beyond this point, and would probably not have made any more advances, considering his opponent down. The wild side of Harry, however, didn't hesitate to leap on his enemy and start ripping at his face and throat like it wanted to all along. Harry watched, no more than a spectator. The rage in him was too much for him to influence his actions any further. This continued for a few seconds before Harry heard yelling, somewhere far away.

"Stop the fight!" Someone had yelled, and other voices joined in. They sounded horrified.

That's right! Someone end this already, before I kill him.

"The Wild One is the winner, Hands, you may restrain your charges now." Iz was announcing loudly. Hadar was just about passed out.

I guess he means restrain me, Harry thought. Please do, this is getting gory.

All of a sudden, something bashed him in the side of the head, and Harry was knocked over, off of Hadar. He immediately recoiled, kneeling, and snarled up at the person wielding a large staff who stood over him. It was one of Hadar's Hand, looking mad enough to hit him again.

"Stop!" Someone yelled behind him, and Harry figured it sounded like Vosenn.

The man didn't listen, and went to him again. Harry wrenched the bat from his hands and broke it over his knee, splintering it in a million little pieces. Bastard!

"Back off!" Gray was saying, striding up to the man, who glared at him in response.

Vosenn was next to him, and she hand something in her hand. She threw it at Harry's face, and he was momentarily blinded, and stood still, shocked. It had looked like dust, but it was like splinters of ice were being shoved into his head. Everything was going numb. Harry sat down suddenly, tired.

A moment later she was holding his face in her hands, looking into his eyes. "Harry," Vosenn said. "Say something."

"Ah..." He moaned. "Merlin," he swore.

"What?" She asked quizzically, and then shrugged it off. "Oh well, as long as you're talking."

"Hmm," he said, lying down. Then he was being lifted off the ground and carried.

When he next opened his eyes, he was lying in his bed. "Whoa," he slurred, "How did I get here?"

Everyone was sitting at the table, looking at him apprehensively. Harry had thought he was feeling the pain before, during the fight, but he'd been only half there and it had only been the tip of the iceberg.

"You okay?" Sariah asked.

"What was that you threw at me, Vosenn?" was all he wanted to know.

Vosenn smiled. "Ice powder," she said. "I'm very good at making it, it's my own recipe. It's really hard to make though, and it expires really fast. So it's not usually an option, but I was up all night making it so I had some on hand. Effective, isn't it?"

Harry nodded, and they made their way over and stood over him.

"Your face is all slashed up," Sariah said, wincing. "And your wrist looks broken."

"Yeah," Jon agreed, then chuckled. "That happened near the beginning, actually, but Harry didn't seem to notice."

Sariah was crying. "Hey, hey, stop that," Gray said, taking her shoulders.

"That was awful," she said.

"Well look at your job," Vosenn said. "You're going to have to get used to violence."

"That's not it," Sariah insisted, shaking her head. "I signed on so that I could help. I know I can help Harry stay calm and in control, but this is different. All this was on purpose, that's why it's so awful."

"She's right," Gray said. "This was wrong."

"Was that guy allowed to do that?" Harry asked.

"What, hit you?" Jon asked. "You remember that?"

"A little."

Vosenn shrugged. "There isn't a rule that says he can't. Generally when it comes to Cursed anything is accepted as long as non-cursed don't get hurt. Of course if we got there first I could have just taken care of it, but he entered the circle before the fight was even called over. And it's not as if he could hurt you that bad, after what you went through by that point, it's not really comparable."

"Ticked me off," Harry told them.

Vosenn raised an eyebrow. "Yes, we noticed."

"There should be a Healer in to take care of you," Gray said, and Harry took a moment to look at him closely. Gray looked concerned, but not terribly shaken. He must be used to it from Alexander, Harry thought.

The door opened, and Harry sat up a little to lean on his elbows and see who it was. Iz looked in at them, and smiled.

"Well done, Harry." He said, then turned to the others. "The Healer will come soon, Harry will be fine. I would like to invite the rest of you to lunch and a little chat about our plans."

Vosenn shook her head. "No thanks, we'd rather stay and make sure Harry's alright."

Harry was impressed. I know they all respect him a lot, so denying him to stay with me is quite a compliment.

"... with the Queen," Iz added.

"Oh," Vosenn said, stumped. "I guess."

"See you soon Harry," Sariah patted his non-broken wrist. "We'll come right back."

"Have fun," Harry said, and they smiled at him before leaving the room.

The room felt extremely empty, Harry was used to his visitors now and preferred their presence.

The door opened and Kahd stepped in. "Hello!" She said brightly. "I requested to take care of you and see how you're doing."

"Hey Kahd," Harry said, smiling at her. I can see why they call the Healers 'Gift of the Gods'. She's just so pretty and nice... and the healing ability comes in handy.

Khad stepped up next to him and started lighting running her fingers over his face and shoulders, and the stinging abated. Next she held his wrist between her hands, concentrating on it, and Harry could see his hand straightening out as the bones knit themselves back together. She ran her hands once down each of his arms, legs, and once over his chest, and Harry could feel injuries he hadn't even

noticed he had gotten melting away. All this took a couple minutes, and Harry spent the time watching her peaceful face, her eyes closed.

She opened her eyes. "How's that?"

"Much better, thank you." Harry said, then thoughtfully wondered, "I want ask you a question... if I wanted to visit another Cursed in the Keep, could that be arranged?"

"You want to go deeper into the Keep?" She asked, surprised. "That's a new one."

"Not really, I just want to see someone."

She shrugged. "You could ask your Hand or the Keepers to take you, but your conversation would probably be listened in on. If you want a private conversation," she winked at him. "I could probably make that happen."

"Really?" Harry queried.

"Sure, hold on." She over to the door, opening it and leaning out, and he could hear her talking to the guard. She came back, happy. "I told them to move you, smiling pretty, and they didn't ask why."

"Okay, remember the cell I was in before this? Could I just go there for a little bit?"

Kahd laughed. "Okay, Wildly Silly One, whatever you say."

He got up, feeling brand new, and she took his hand as they went out and walked down the hall together. The guard followed them. There wasn't any space to fly under the ground, so they had many stairways to go down until they were in some of the deepest levels of the Keep. Harry could feel his mood sink as if the weight of the ground above them was pressing down on it. They walked past Aadon's cell, and Harry could see Aadon sitting in the middle of the room with his back turned. The guard from that floor, unfazed, opened the cell next door. By Kahd's presence they seemed to assume that he was meant to go there.

"I'm going to walk along the floor and see if anyone needs medical care," Kahd told him. "Sometimes they neglect to tell me when someone's hurt themselves." She walked off down the hall, looking into cells. He could hear her talking to the men inside, and their grateful voices. They were pleased to see her pretty smiling face and healing hands.

"Hey, Aadon," he called. "Aadon, you hear me?"

"Hello, boy," Aadon greeted him. Harry could hear him move to the doorway of his cell, and knew that once again that they were sitting next to each other but out of sight. "What did you do to get put back down here?"

"I didn't," Harry explained, "I asked to come here for a little while so I could talk to you."

"You did?" Aadon asked, amused. "What an interesting thing to do."

"I have a couple questions... there are things I don't understand."

"Well start by telling me everything that has happened since we last spoke," Aadon said. Harry took a deep breath and recounted everything. Aadon listened silently.

"Why could I see what was going on during the last part of the fight? I thought I wasn't supposed to." Harry asked.

Aadon deliberated for a second. "It happens in various degrees to all Cursed. I'm impressed that you moved beyond just watching and managed to influence your primal state. There's a little bit of you left in there when you're changed, it's not always conscious, but there."

"What about Phia, the girl who visited me and brought the claw?"

"Did you know that no Cursed has EVER attacked a Healer?"

"No, I didn't know that," Harry said.

"They are so non-threatening that to the primal mind they seem to not even exist. With the little girls, it must be the same thing, there's nothing scary about two frightened little girls. The Bloodbeast was a different story. You may have meant to rescue them, but probably not, as you don't remember it, right?"

"I might..." Harry thought hard. When he'd woken up in the cell, he'd had a few flashes of memory. "Maybe just a few seconds."

"What's happening to you... I'm afraid to say that you've been doubly cursed, in my opinion. It's something I suffer from myself, and part of the reason I'm considered so dangerous. I've always had a degree of control during my episodes. With time yours may develop further as well. Don't tell them."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Isn't it useful that I could be... aimed better?"

"You would think so," Aadon said. "But nothing terrifies them more. An out of control Cursed has NO motive. But if you chose to, you could direct your anger to benefit your own desires. You're taking their weapon away from them for your own use."

"Is that really how they see us? Weapons?" Harry asked dejectedly.

"Yes." Aadon said firmly. "Also, it's a terrifying thing to remember hurting people, that's why I find the awareness a burden. You see everything but can't always stop yourself. The primal state behaves in a way that is beyond what we can deal with sometimes."

Harry was nodding to himself. "You see things you just don't want to." He had another question, "So explain to me how it works with Cursed interacting, it has to do with being in eyesight, right? From the beginning I've had no problem talking to you, it's because we can't see each other in these cells, right?"

"Partly," Aadon explained. "It helps if you don't look another Cursed in the eyes. If you look at his hair, for example, it's a much better bet. But it also depends on the control of the Cursed involved. I have very good control, and as we've covered before you're developing some."

When you look at me, I'm calm and you're okay. If you look at another Cursed that immediately gets riled up, you will react to that. So it really depends on the Cursed with which you're interacting. Distance is also important, if you're far enough away, or even if you're a little bit far away and there's a good barrier between you it dulls the effect."

"So why don't Cursed just wear blindfolds or something?"

"It's a good thought, but it doesn't work. Being blinded just irritates most Cursed to the point where they might as well not be wearing them. Though if you're going to be leaving the Pit you might as well get used to the idea of wearing a blindfold."

"Really?" Harry was perplexed. "How come?"

"The Sun Sickness," Aadon said simply. "Not everyone gets it, but it's better to not risk the Sun Sickness. Sometimes, when Cursed look into the sun, something happens... they are driven to self destruct. They go crazy, but instead of the insanity being directed outward, it's directed inward. They suicide. Sometimes they get this intense drive to escape and nothing can stop them and they fly away, usually up. They're never seen again."

"Whoa." Is there anything about the Cursed that ISN'T extreme?

"So when we leave the Pit we're blindfolded during the daytime to prevent the Sun Sickness," Aadon concluded. "You're very lucky it didn't happen to you while you were in the wild, after you escaped. It seems to usually happen to more powerful Cursed."

"Thanks for the help," Harry told him, then something else occurred to him. "Wait... do you... do you think you can tell me how to port? I don't know how."

"We were made to do it, so it's not hard to figure out. There are two different kinds of porting. There's simple porting, where you disappear and reappear anywhere on the same planet, though it helps if you can see where you're going or if you've been to that place before because you have to be able to visualize it. You won't be able to do it with your gates on, that's what they prevent, nor will you be

able to create real portals without permission. All you do for that is visualize where you want to go, and tell yourself to go there. It just works. You can bring anyone with you that you have body contact with; wrapping your wings around is the best way."

"Now real portals are trickier. You go through the same process of visualizing... only you visualize blankness, nothingness. If it helps you can visualize being beyond the sky, above the atmosphere where everything is empty. You will find yourself in the Void. The Void is a terrible place. Icy cold, and difficult to fly in. Don't ever port someone with you into the Void, they'll die within minutes. Besides the Gods we're the only life forms that can survive inside the Void, and you've seen the price we have to pay, we need to struggle to exist anywhere else, even our own home planet. Inside the Void you have to fly around until you find the right spot to fly out of. Flying across the Void like that is pulling a thread between the two worlds, you'll be able to open a portal and people can step through and instantaneously find themselves on the other side."

"But when I stepped into the portal at Hogwarts," Harry protested, "It wasn't instantaneous, but I didn't really feel the Void as you describe it either."

"Well you must have just redirected the portal momentarily," Aadon said thoughtfully. "It would still be the same connection between the two worlds, and where you get out on the other side is irrelevant, really. It's just strange that you managed to come out into the Pit itself. That's still a mystery to me."

"Thanks again, Aadon... Kahd!" Harry called out into the hall.

"Coming!" she answered, and walked up to his cell. "You ready to go?" Harry nodded. She motioned to the guard, who let him out. Walking by Aadon's cell, Harry saw that Aadon had moved back to the middle of the cell again, but he winked at Harry as Harry glanced in. Harry smiled. He's a good guy. He doesn't deserve to be locked up down here for so long.

As they walked back up with the Guard, Kahd reached out and took his hand again, holding it until they were back on his floor. She

walked him in and they said their farewells. She had only stepped out a second when she was back, her face white.

"Natan and his people are down at the end of the hallway," she said. "I'm glad we came back when we did, if we'd been gone when they came to look for you I'd be in very much trouble."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know." Harry said regretfully.

"It's okay, just don't mention our little venture, alright?"

"Of course not. Thank you again Kahd." She bestowed upon him a sweet smile and held the door open for Natan as he walked in.

Natan had his usual steely expression on his face. "Good to see you on your feet," he said unconvincingly. "You're requested by the Princess."

"Really?" Harry wondered. "That's... nice, I suppose."

"We'll be leaving for her quarters immediately," Natan told him.

"Oh. Okay." Unresistingly he followed them out. I really hate that man, he realized. I knew I hated him, but... I REALLY hate him. I'm reaching my limit, my tolerance for this controlled life is about gone. I need to find the way out of here.

Harry was glad to be summoned when they went outside to the now empty bottom of the pit and he knew he would be able to enjoy the freedom of flight. The red circle was gone; there was no sign of the huge crowd that had been there just that morning. The escort surrounded him and they moved into the air. Harry stretched his wings, smiling. They moved up. Minutes later they passed the huge ledge that marked the Queen's Hall. They didn't enter there, but continued to a side entrance that was much smaller. Harry recognized the long strange hallways filled with enchanted stones that led to Enna's rooms.

They got to the door and Natan knocked, and then opened it. He stepped back for Harry to go in by himself, and then waited outside.

He closed the door after Harry stepped in, and Harry looked around the large room. Enna was on the other side, and he looked at her carefully, nearly having forgotten how beautiful she was in person. Her face was concerned as she crossed the space between them.

“Wild One,” she said softly. “...what is your real name?”

“Harry.”

“Harry, they said you were... fighting?” Enna frowned. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Harry said, surprised by this show of concern. I wonder who told her.

“You could have been hurt!” She insisted. “What possessed you to do something like that?!”

Harry looked at her blankly. Fighting is what I’m supposed to do if I’m going to be your bodyguard. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone more sheltered in my life... and clearly she doesn’t have her details straight.

“It wasn’t my choice,” He told her. “Your mother ordered me to.”

“What?” Enna’s brow wrinkled. “Why would she do that?” She looked vaguely dazed.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe you should sit down,” he suggested, and she complied. “Your mother the Queen gave the order that I was to fight.”

“On purpose?” Enna squeaked, eyes wide. Harry sat in the chair next to her.

“Yes.” Harry said patiently.

“Oh my,” she mumbled. This was quite a different Enna than he had met last time, the first time they had met she had been a lot more forward, today she was withdrawn.

"Is everything okay?" Harry asked her. "I mean, last time I was in your rooms you demanded to know who I was, that's quite a change in manner."

She blushed. "I'm sorry about that. I was angry with Mother, and behaved thoughtlessly, I wasn't expecting you. I shouldn't have been so rude."

"It was quite alright," he told her. "You don't have to be shy, I was okay with it. I'm not always happy with your mother either."

"Really?" She said, surprised, and then blushed again. "Well... I suppose making you fight people would be part of that."

Harry nodded. "I'm corrupting you aren't I?" he asked with a smile.

She laughed lightly. "Maybe you are, I'd rather have the truth though. Sometimes I think they don't tell me everything that goes on."

"Could be," he implied.

"How could they do that to you?" Enna added angrily. "How could Mother do that?"

Harry didn't answer, sitting quietly and looking at her. Her eyes lit up when she was mad.

"So..." he said finally. "Since you've said it's okay that I'll be your bodyguard, what do you think about leaving your rooms and traveling?"

Enna tilted her head thoughtfully. "I don't know yet. I think I'll figure it out. It's a little scary."

Harry made himself comfortable in the chair, leaning back and sinking in. They talked for a while, and she got bolder, telling him about what she did in her quarters. He told her about his new friends, the Hand.

There came a strong knock on the door, and both looked over their shoulders at it. "Do you want me to check who it is?" he asked and Enna nodded. He got up and went to the door, opening it.

"Hey guys," he said, smiling widely at Jon, Vosenn, Sariah and Gray. Gray raised an eyebrow at him, looking amused, standing in the back. Nobody else looked amused at all, they looked exasperated and frazzled, and Sariah looked worried.

"Harry!" Vosenn said, relieved. "We came back, and you were gone..."

"Oh," Harry said, comprehending. "They didn't tell you that I'd gone anywhere."

"You can't tell someone a million times to go everywhere with someone, and then move him when you're not looking!" Jon said, angry, and Harry examined him, very surprised. The look on Jon's face was uncommon for him; Harry was used to his lighthearted friend finding a joke in everything. "Well, there you are," he said, relaxing and redeeming himself slightly.

Vosenn still looked angry.

"I was just meeting with the princess," Harry told them.

"The princess!" Sariah said, and her eyebrows rose. Everyone looked suitable impressed.

"You want to meet her?" Harry asked, and they all nodded. "Enna, the people I told you about are here," he called over his shoulder. "Can they come in?"

"I suppose," she answered, and Harry turned and walked in with the others following.

"Everyone, this is princess Enna," he introduced.

Enna got to her feet and smiled shyly, turning slightly to hide behind her shoulder.

"This is Jon, Vosenn, Sariah, and Gray," he said, pointing to each of them in turn.

Jon had a look of dawning comprehension on his face. "Oh," he said.

"I understand," Vosenn said.

Jon nodded. "Everything makes sense now... she's a Healer."

"No wonder she never comes out of her rooms and we've never heard much about her," Gray said. "We've never had a Healer Queen before..."

Enna hadn't heard their low conversation, and looked flustered. "Well, sit down!" she said.

They all gathered together on the comfortable seats. "We just had a meeting with Iz, explaining what's going to happen next," Vosenn said.

"I think you've suitably proved yourself, Harry," Jon said with a grin. "Everyone who wasn't there has heard all about it, and everyone who was there is still in shock. There were rumors about the Wild One before, but now everyone has heard of you."

"We leave tomorrow," Vosenn announced, and Enna looked apprehensive. Catching onto this, everyone immediately started talking, trying to reassure her.

Harry had stayed standing, and Gray had loyally stood next to him while everyone else sat. Harry took advantage of the moment and their raised voices to nudge Gray, then take a couple steps back. Gray followed casually, and Harry turned his head to talk to his cousin in a low voice.

"Gray... today really hit it home for me," he said mournfully. "I can't stay. I need to go home."

Gray was nodding. "I saw it too," he said. "We need to get you out of here. We can't count on any help from the others, they've been

brainwashed for years that the system in place is the best thing that's ever happened to the Pit. Don't worry," He winked at Harry, "Ren's been working on something."

## Chapter Thirteen: Chief-Prince

The revered Queen, fierce as an icy wind, the Wild One, a dangerous enigma, and a princess unknown to her own people were accompanied by the legend that was Iz. These travelers through the Pit drew a crowd unlike any other. The crowd didn't just fly around and stare of course. Their respect weighed stronger than their curiosity. But as Harry was propelled upward by the stroke of his own powerful wings he saw them gathering. Harry had never been very far above the Queen's Hall, his aunt and uncle's home wasn't far, and the place where the casting stones were kept was only a little above that. Until then the caves were few and far between, casting a sense of privacy. Gradually that changed.

Suddenly the atmosphere was much different, the faces of the people watching them changed. The cave openings and their small ledges, doorsteps, were now all over the place. On every ledge people sat, families, their faces turning to watch them. Parents sat with children, feet dangling in the air over their ledges. In the lower area near the Queen's Hall, people looked toward the Queen with calm respect and familiarity; those were the aristocrats, the mages, the Educated. These people were giddy with awe; they swung their feet merrily, and whispered among each other, holding their children up to look at their queen.

It was an entirely different animal. Harry watched them out of the corner of his eyes, careful not to look to close and scare them. He wasn't looking at a small section of the society, either, after he and his companions few by caves like these for an extended period of time with no end in sight, Harry came to realize that this is what your average Silent was like. Maybe there is hope for this race after all. They look happy and innocent, I doubt they have any idea what lies at the bottom of the Pit.

Iz went in the lead, face tilted up toward the sky and the future. The Queen, lagging slightly behind him, smiled graciously at people, her stunning beauty stealing the sound from their throats. They watched wordlessly, now.

The Princess smiled at no one. She was sheltered by beating wings; no one caught more than a glimpse of her. She and Harry flew upward facing each other but not touching, surrounded by his Hand and an escort of Natan's people. Natan himself followed.

Natan was going to stay behind and was to be in charge during the Queen's absence; he went with them now to bid them farewell. The actual traveling party included Queen Aeyris and Enna, Harry and his Hand, Iz, an aristocrat woman with dark hair, and an older Educated gentleman.

Finally the homes passing by became sparse, and the walls on either side of them, although distant to begin with (forming the massive irregular cylindrical hole that was the Pit), widened slightly. Harry looked dead above him and saw black expansiveness.

IT'S THE SKY.

"Nighttime," he murmured.

"Everdark." Harry looked over his shoulder to see Gray; he tilted his head in question. "We're in Everdark," Gray continued. "The planet rotates such that this whole mountain range is never touched by sun. It's always night here."

"Dark Eyes' idea?" Harry asked, and Gray nodded. "How many suns are there?"

"One. Earth was modeled after Origin. There are some bizarre planet variations out there, but Earth was meant to be an improved, downscale version of the first planet."

"Emphasis on 'meant' noted," Harry said, but softly, filling his eyes with sky. It was a big velvety surface, as if he could reach out and touch it. Why not? I have wings... lets find the end of the sky. Harry's exultation of the night sky was shadowed by a slight claustrophobia. Bodies pressed all around him, and even stronger was the pull of Enna's eyes on him. He met her pale gold eyes. She looked terrified.

"Have you ever seen the sky before, Princess?" he asked, and she shook her head mutely.

"So big!" she whispered with wonder, so softly he almost missed it.

"So wonderful," he said, just as quiet. She was looking at him again, an unreadable expression on her face.

They reached the lip, the edge, and landed together in a group. Harry took a moment to look around; they were on the very tip of the biggest mountain he'd ever seen. However, he still got the feeling that the Pit extended down and beyond the height of the mountain, deep into the ground. The entrance of the Pit was so different from this end. For a moment Harry was lost in a fantasy; he imagined approaching this spot from the opposite direction. He felt like he must be playing his story backwards. First he would climb the implausibly immense mountain range—though there wasn't much chance of that, Harry could tell. The only way to bypass the sheer cliffs was to fly. Stop sabotaging your own fantasy Harry.

After he climbed the sheer cliffs and stood on the very tallest point, he would find the inky black circle, hundreds of yards across: a bottomless hole. The edges were rough and crumbly. Looking at them implied falling into the darkness forever. That's what it would look like for anyone else, Harry acknowledged. The way it makes sense to approach it... but I'm coming from the belly of the beast.

"It's night out there, too," Gray's voice broke into Harry's thoughts, and Harry had the sudden startling need to turn and hug his cousin, a big, scared, grappling hug. What would I do without Gray? Logical, practical, loyal Gray. "When its daytime outside of Everdark, it's like a halo of light on the horizon that gets brighter the further you fly. It's beautiful, really. To the other side we're just big shadow."

"I wonder if I will ever see it?" Harry said for Gray's ears alone. Their fellow travelers stood on the platform at the top of the mountain looking around themselves with a similar sense of distracted wonder. On second thought, Harry thought Enna might be listening in on their conversation but he couldn't be sure.

Gray said "Hmm," noncommittally. "This is the porting point, by the way. If we were going anywhere other than Origin, this is the point where porting is possible."

Harry crossed his arms to press the palms of his hands to his gates. They felt cold, hard, too real.

They were dressed to impress. The Queen wore a long golden dress that suited her perfectly, a crown, small clear gems sparked in her hair, and beautiful dappled fur was draped over her shoulders. Enna matched her exactly, a smaller, paler version with a circlet in her hair. Iz had his own outfit on, layers of brown and blue, as did the two thus-far unnamed companions. Vosenn and Sariah had simple practical clothes in light violet and Jon and Gray male versions of the same clothes in dark purple-blue. All had layers for warmth, from the Queen's fur to the jackets his Hand wore. Harry was the odd one out, he was mildly self-conscious. He was wearing pitch black trousers with his belt and pouch, and he was bare-chested. He could feel the chill, but it was a distant feeling. The cold was only a thin shell, it didn't affect him. Inside he was warm. Wrath's fire.

Hey Dark Eyes... he thought jokingly, hoping the god wouldn't actually answer. I'll trade you for a coat?

The Queen had bid her farewells to Natan, and he and his men moved to the edge of the inky Pit and dropped out of sight. Harry shuddered when he saw how the darkness in the hole swallowed them without delay.

"Take wing," Iz said in a ringing, commanding voice, and they bent their knees to launch upward.

"No!" someone said in a voice, not so ringing, that caught their attention immediately non-the-less. Everyone stopped and looked at Enna. "I won't do it," she repeated stubbornly, softly. "Mother I want to go back now."

The Queen looked at her speculatively. Harry saw something in her eyes; the woman had an inner strength that rivaled the impregnability of the Pit itself. She was a force to be reckoned with. To her, Enna

was a peculiar creature, something beyond her comprehension. ‘What is this?’ she seemed to be thinking, ‘Where did this person come from?’

It was a long unnatural silence, as everyone expected the Queen to react. She just looked at her daughter. Enna must have seen the same thing in her mother’s eyes; she was shrinking inside herself. She looked more and more awkward and uncomfortable until eventually she just looked downright ashamed.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. She can’t help her nature! He wanted to say, and glare angrily. She can’t help her nature any more than I can help mine.

“I’m sorry Enna. That is not an option.” Aeyris said calmly and directly.

Enna’s lips parted in a silent gasp. She didn’t move. Taking action, Harry stepped forward and folded his arms around her. Reacting to the hug, she reached up and rested her hands on the back of his neck, and Harry found it hard to breathe. This was the closest he’d ever been to her. Enna struggled momentarily when she realized his intention. When she’d put her arms over his shoulders he lifted her up slightly, so that her feet dangled above the ground. With a sigh she went limp. Harry hoped she’d given in, and not fainted.

Harry found the Queen looking at him approvingly. “We can move on, then,” she said.

“Take wing!” Iz called again, and they all leaped up, moving the air below them with their wings. Harry found Enna to be even lighter than Ren, she was seemingly weightless. When they moved away from the tip of the mountain there was nothing but endless space below them. It was both the most exhilarating and terrifying sight he’d ever seen. In the Pit it was different; everything was dark and closed in. Here the world was an endless playground, were he free to fly the skies. It was... discovering another dimension, the third dimension, after being two dimensional nearly your whole life.

Harry knew he could fly much faster, but they were pacing themselves for a long flight. Imagine: it’s like we’re walking to our

destination. No broom, no floo, no train, just our own strength. They flew as much in a group as possible, but had to space themselves to leave room for their wingspan, and Harry found that on top of that the disruptive wake in the air from the other Silents in flight got irritating, so they spaced themselves even more, all following Iz. Harry and the Queen were vaguely in the middle, though not very near to each other.

"You could do all of this in the blink of an eye by porting, you know," Gray called. "I've been reading up... apparating is similar, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Why aren't we porting, then?"

"Too large of a group, I suppose. We would need more Cursed, and it's not worse the risk of having them along. It's not that hard of a flight, after all. We've got to stretch our wings sometimes," Gray said sarcastically. "The Pit is a bit confining, you could say."

Once the mountains were behind them, the area below them was blanketed by forest. They flew over the forest, which continued on as far as Harry could see to both sides, but ahead was a distinct line where the dark forest came to an abrupt end.

"The Divide!" Gray announced, spotting it as well. "That's about where they found you, you know."

It was a jolt when the realization hit Harry that he'd been here before. He didn't remember it, but he'd lived here, this had been home to him for a time. What must I have been like? I've glimpsed that other side of me, but I don't think I could ever fully grasp what it is. Harry struggled to find familiarity within the landscape. He had to have taken this exact same route last time.

They flew over the Divide, and everything turned into grasslands. The grass was tall and rippled in the wind. They flew further yet over the grasslands, before starting to slop downward. Far ahead Harry saw figures standing in the grass. They got larger and larger, and Harry could see then that they were centaurs.

It wasn't until they landed gracefully in front of these centaurs that Harry saw that they were NOT centaurs. Well... they were... but unlike any centaurs Harry had ever seen. They were larger, sleeker, and while the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest looked like ponies, these were like massive gazelle. Harry was very impressed. Well... these are the original centaurs. What we've got is what's left of a small isolated breed that's been dying off for centuries. Thank you book of Earth.

Enna lifted her head and looked around. "Thank you," she said in his ear, almost inaudibly. Harry put her down, and the Queen came and touched her shoulder.

Enna nodded that she was alright. They walked forward through the thigh high grass, it got yet taller as they walked onward. Harry parted it, and Enna followed a step behind him in his wake. The Queen fell into step next to them.

"Here's the situation," she said. "The strange creatures, the ice lizards, have been cropping up here and there. Nobody knows what planet they come from, or how they get here. Nobody has seen one go through a portal."

"I thought I felt a portal in my aunt and uncle's home the night my cousin Alexander disappeared," Harry said, knowing he'd told her this already.

The Queen shrugged. "It's a possibility, I suppose. Normally I would say that porting in the Pit is impossible and disregarded that information, but there is the mystery of Alexander disappearing without a trace. And there's you. You defy the norm."

"Well I certainly didn't open a portal," he said, wondering if she was implying something.

"No, certainly not," she said with surety. "The gates are infallible."

"I thought Dark Eyes' block on porting in the Pit was infallible too," he pointed out. There's a thought. I should test these.

The Queen ignored him. "Everyone is understandably concerned. We have three races in the region near our Pit- the Vineadryads that live before the Divide, the Centaurs that live just beyond it, and even further are the Bloodbeasts, but they never come to the Divide. They do, however, hunt in the grasslands, which is a problem."

"Except for the one I bit this claw off, near the Divide," Harry interjected.

The Queen sighed. "Yes, I know." Harry could sense her irritation. She was used to having things where they belong, and he was stirring them up.

"The Vineadryad villages are spread out all over the place, there aren't any near us. They're not much for action anyway, and I haven't heard from them. The Centaurs are ruled by a council of their most knowledgeable elders, and my contact to them told me they're concerned by this unknown variable, the ice lizards. And they say that the Bloodbeasts aren't happy about them either. We want to all touch base, see if anyone knows something we do not, and come up with a plan. The problem is, the Elders don't leave their home in the hills. Ever. Especially not to visit the Bloodbeasts, their most hated enemies. There has been animosity between the two races from the beginning; the Centaurs are a peaceful, intelligent race, and the Bloodbeasts are born for violence. The Bloodbeasts are always sneaking onto the grasslands to hunt, and there are inevitable confrontations between the two. So if we do have a meeting, I must be there for my allies, the Centaurs. Our presence would put a damper on any violence, especially with Harry along."

Everyone had drawn together to listen to her in rapt silence. They followed their Centaurs escorts over a rolling hill and up ahead was another hill, a larger, steeper one. On the side of the hill was an opening, and light was shining out.

"Sensible place to live, inside a hill," Iz said. "I think I see why we're allies..."

The entrance was huge, to fit the large frame of the centaurs, and they walked in at a slightly downward slope, coming into a large

circular room. The walls were smooth dirt, and every couple feet were neat stacks of stone bricks, acting as pillars.

"We supply them with the stone bricks," Sariah said softly. "My father oversees their transportation to the Centaurs."

Seven old Centaurs were standing around a circular table, looking at them solemnly. The Queen curtsied, and the eldest of them all stepped forward with a smile on his worn face and gave her a hug. "Beautiful as always," he complimented.

"Thank you Enilor," the Queen said, and moved forward. "Greetings, Wise."

They nodded in response. "Queen Aeyris, a pleasure to have you among us." The light in the room shone from above their table, where a net hung down with a glowing orb in it. "Who are your companions?" They were looking at Harry, and at Enna.

"This is Iz, he accompanied me last time I was here." Iz and the Centaurs nodded at each other in recognition. "And this," she said, taking Enna's shoulder so she stepped forward. "Is my daughter, the Princess Enna."

They all looked impressed. "Thank you for bringing her along and introducing us. She's so lovely. She looks very much like her mother." Enna blushed, and stepped backwards.

"Why did you bring that one?" The eldest one asked. He was looking at Harry. "He's touched."

Harry lifted an eyebrow. "Touched?" he asked Gray who was closely standing next to him. "Where I come from, people sometimes use that word to mean mentally handicapped."

Gray smiled. "They can tell you're different, touched by the Gods."

"Yes," The Queen affirmed. "He's touched. I brought him along for personal safety reasons. This young man is the only one who actually fought an ice lizard, and killed one."

They looked surprised. "The first we've heard of as well," said one among the circle.

"Which brings me to this," The Queen said with a smile, and leaving the others behind, went to the table. Harry, Enna, and his Hand drew back to stand against the wall, Iz stepped forward. Harry saw the dark haired woman take the older man's hand and join him.

"This is Sava, a mage, and her husband Gheric, one of our Educated," the Queen introduced.

That makes sense; she brought a guide and leader, a Healer, a Cursed, a Hand, a Mage and an Educated. The complete set.

The man Gheric pulled something out of a bag and placed it on a table. It was a folded up cloth. As he unfolded it something crackled over its surface. No one reacted, Harry wondered if anyone even saw it, but then Gray nudged him. Magic, Harry realized. There's a spell on the fabric.

Harry wasn't prepared for what was inside the fabric. When the bundle was opened, there lay a shredded looking arm, white, scaly, and clawed.

"This is from the ice lizard carcass," Gheric explained. "Perfectly preserved."

The centaurs looked impressed, and hoofs thumped slightly as some of them shifted and stepped around in pleasure. "For study! A formidable gift." Everyone looked at Harry, knowing he was responsible for the shredding. He looked back stoically, embarrassed.

The Queen, the three other Silents and the Centaurs all leaned and conversed, and the younger ones all tuned them out.

"You're doing great," Harry told Enna who stood next to him. Gray was on his right and Enna on his left.

She shrugged listlessly, but Harry thought she looked a little pleased. He thought it would be fun if they could all sit down in another room and chat and hang out, but this clearly wasn't the occasion for it. They stood silently and respectfully, bored as they were, until the meeting was done. Harry could tell they were done when everyone started moving, stepping back from the table.

"This man here, Eniladas," the eldest centaur said, pointing to one of the centaurs the Silents had met outside, "will accompany you to meet the Bloodbeasts on our behalf."

The Queen nodded. Eniladas walked out the door back into the tunnel, the Queen followed, and Iz motioned for the younger Silents to come. The other two and the rest of the Centaurs that had originally accompanied them, three more in all, came as well.

"Eniladas is a very Centaur name," Gray told Harry. "They tell us that the Hermit God's true name is Enilos, and so many of them have names like that."

Once they were out of the tunnel Harry could see that Eniladas had turned to talk to the Queen. "The Wise trust you, and since that is the case, I can trust you as well. Can you pledge that if we enter Bloodbeast territory we will be defended if necessary? I can fight but there will be too many of them."

"You have my word," the Queen promised. "You will be safe under our wings."

They nodded, and Iz called the now familiar, "Take wing!"

This time Enna flew on her own. The Centaurs cantered at great speeds below them across the terrain, which became rockier and drier, progressively nastier. The Centaurs came to an abrupt halt, and Harry scanned the ground to see what was wrong. Something was standing in their way, yards away from the Centaurs.

"Enna, Vosenn, Sariah, Sava and Gheric, stay in the air. Everyone else down," The Queen commanded, landing in front of the Centaurs, and Harry and the others joined her.

"It's only one," Eniladas said. "We can crush him with our hooves."

"And expect not to be attacked?" Iz asked, and the Centaurs were silent.

Harry looked closely, interested in what these infamous Bloodbeasts looked like. He gripped the large metal claw around his neck in his hand. It was more human than he expected, he could see a toned warrior standing in front of him. Harry thought the Bloodbeast looked rather what he would expect a were-lion to look like: shaggy, large, muscular and fierce. Its eyes were angry, it bared its teeth and Harry could see its metallic claws. There's nothing to fear, Harry, you've taken one of them down before, right? He reminded himself. How the hell did I do that?! He wondered.

"We are here to visit the Chief-King," Queen Aeyris announced. "Let us pass."

The Bloodbeast growled. "I'm not stopping you," he said clearly. He was wearing pants stitched together from very raw looking hides.

However, he didn't move. Those on the ground had to walk around him, giving him a wide berth, in order to move on. They walked with the centaurs for a short while before taking to the air again. Harry could see the Bloodbeast following them from a distance.

Up ahead Harry saw a gathering of Bloodbeasts, and following Iz's lead they all landed to walk toward them together with the Centaurs. The Bloodbeasts turned to look at them, men and women with the same expression: distaste.

Vosenn was looking at the horizon. "We have less than two hours until dawn."

So? Harry thought. Oh yeah... the sun-sickness.

"How would I be able to help you, if I'm blindfolded?" Harry asked her.

“Your presence, for one. People know not to start anything with a Cursed around. And if we are attacked, once you’re out of your head it doesn’t matter anymore, the sun-sickness only happens when you’re in your right mind.”

“Oh.” Either Aadon didn’t know that... or because I’m different he didn’t think it applies. What happens if you’re in between?

In the middle of the crowd of Bloodbeasts stood the biggest of them all. He was wearing a robe of furs, but other than that nothing marked him as different other than his overbearing aura of authority.

“Hello Chief-King.” Queen Aeyris said. “It has been a very, very long time since we’ve seen one another, has it not?”

He grunted affirmatively.

The Queen did not introduce her companions; she did not show them her daughter. Eniladas went to stand with her and everyone else moved back to stay out of the way. Harry stood in front of them to make sure the Bloodbeasts could see him.

“My mother is very brave, isn’t she?” Enna said quietly. Everyone nodded. Even though they stood to the side, there were still Bloodbeasts everywhere, even behind them where they had moved in.

“You have nothing to fear, princess,” Iz said. “They would have nothing to gain by attacking. They’re only trying to intimidate us, it’s what they do. Attacking the Queen or anyone with her would be suicide and they know it. The whole Silent race would come down on them, and even they fear the Cursed.”

They got bored, and it was an uncomfortable wait with so many eyes upon them. All of a sudden the Bloodbeasts stirred, and Harry looked around for the cause.

Out of nowhere one of the Bloodbeasts charged. With a flying leap he was upon Harry before Harry even had time to react. WHAT?! WHY ON ORIGIN WOULD—

Harry was tackled to the ground, slammed into the dusty dirty ground of the desert. He tried to push the Bloodbeast off him, but it held on with its claws. The Bloodbeast was snarling angrily, with real hate, attacking like a whirlwind, and Harry thrashed him back in response. Around him voices were yelling in alarm, but no one dared approach. The two rolled on the ground, struggling, Harry managed to get on top and flap his wings, slicing the Bloodbeasts sides. Filthy blood pooled on the ground, and it grew angrier, clawing at Harry's chest. The claws left long, deep, nasty scratches. It hurt, but Harry was slightly apathetic about it, it didn't much compare to the fight with Hadar.

Harry snarled back in response, wondering how soon he would lose his mind and start attacking everyone. Then he noticed something: the Bloodbeast had only four claws on one hand. He started to laugh, and the laughing released something inside him, something that relaxed him even though the fight wasn't over. This made the Bloodbeast angrier yet, but Harry couldn't stop chuckling. In control of himself, he bashed the Bloodbeast's head once on the ground, and stepped back as it lay stunned. He walked back to the others and stood calmly. If what Iz said about the Bloodbeasts was true, than they couldn't afford to let this one attack him again. Everyone was looking at him, bewildered.

"You okay, Harry?" Vosenn said, sounding shaken.

"Fine," Harry said casually.

The Queen's face went from shock to anger. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded to the Chief-King loudly.

"It is not my doing," he said gravely. The one on the ground was recovering, and got to his feet, dazed. He was young and very fit, and he put his hands over his sides to stop some of the bleeding.

"Son," The Chief-King demanded. "What possesses you?"

The Chief-Prince glared at Harry self-righteously. "This one has something of mine!" he insisted furiously. He pointed.

Harry looked down at the claw on his chest. Of course that's what set him off, he saw me wearing it, like a trophy of victory.

The Queen had walked back to her people in the meantime and was standing next to Harry. "Where did you get the claw, Harry?" she asked, and everyone looked at it with interest.

"I fought a Bloodbeast in the forest near the Divide," he explained. "I bit the claw off and it was stuck in my mouth. One of the Healers had to remove it, and she gave it to me."

"What was a Bloodbeast doing on that side of the Divide?" Eniladas wanted to know.

"You cannot tell my son where he can and cannot go!" The Chief-King growled at him. "Our territory does not have a boundary, we may go where we please!"

"I want my claw," The Chief-Prince insisted still. "HE CAN'T HAVE IT!"

"No." The word was said loudly, and resolutely, and the Chief-Prince gazed at his father in utter shock. Harry remembered when Aeyris had said the same word to Enna earlier that night, almost in the exact same way.

"No?" The prince repeated.

"No. I'm having a meeting, and you disrupted it. If you were anyone but my son, you would be punished for this. Now go away." The Chief-King looked at Harry. "You earned that claw in a fair fight, and by our laws that makes it yours. You earned the right to wear it by defending yourself just now." He nodded approvingly. "That's our way."

The prince looked like he wanted to howl in frustration, and in a moment he was gone in the other direction, taking off into the desert.

"Let's make this short," The Queen said. "We need to be on our way."

The Chief-King nodded.

“Are we going home?” Enna asked Iz, but Iz shook his head.

“Not yet, princess.”

“Where are we going next?” Jon asked, sounding excited. It has been a rather excited night, Harry agreed.

“The City of the Half-people,” Iz told them. Harry and Gray exchanged a glance.

## Chapter 14: City Lords

"The sun is about to rise," Iz noted.

Harry was carrying Enna again. First she'd healed his chest, the first time he'd seen her use her gift. She smiled as she did it, her first smile since leaving her home. First they had accompanied the Centaurs back to their lands, and then back over the desert. They'd flown hard to get away from the Bloodbeasts, who made everyone uncomfortable. They'd continued flying nonstop, faster than before.

"I want to see the City," Harry told him, disappointed.

"Well, that's why we're rushing," Iz told him. "We're moving faster than expected due to you carrying Enna all this way, and we thought it would be good to have our feet on the ground by sunrise. The City is just over that ridge."

Everyone sped up upon hearing that, and they flew over the mountainous crest and looked down. The land sloped down gently to meet the sea, and blanketing the slope was a huge City. It was really and truly enormous. The buildings were almost all white, simple and archaic looking, and built out of stone. There was a clear downtown area, featuring a few larger buildings.

"It looks like... Italy or something," Harry said, thinking of postcards he'd seen. It was quite unlike anywhere he had lived before. These were the first buildings he'd seen in weeks. The streets looked empty, it wasn't even dawn, but in those houses were humans.

"Half-people," Queen Aeyris said with distaste, right next to him. He hadn't noticed she was so close; she was gazing down at the city contemptuously.

"They're better than the Bloodbeasts," Harry said to her.

Aeyris shrugged. Enna had twisted her head to look over her shoulder at the City as well. She gasped.

"The City is big, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"No," she said. "What IS that?"

"...The ocean?" Harry asked, understanding.

"Wow!" She said, stunned. "So much water..."

"I don't think we have time to go down to the sea on this trip, Enna," The Queen said. Enna hid her face against Harry's shoulder; Harry couldn't tell if she was relieved or disappointed.

They flew down and landed near the edge of the City. Vosenn pulled something out of her bag and handed it to Harry. The front part of it looked like a small face mask with no eye openings, so that it would conform to his face. Also she pulled out a long piece of cloth. Harry handed the mask back, preferring to her to do it. She put it on his face and held it in place while putting the black fabric over it and tying it behind his head. She thoughtfully pushed the many small braids behind his ears and smoothed him against his head to lie flat. It was effective, it looked like a simple blindfold but behind it, the mask assured that no light escaped around or through the fabric. Harry was really and truly blind.

"It's a shame you'll never see the sun again," The Queen called carelessly from some ways away. "We just can't risk the sun-sickness."

Harry growled in response. Coldhearted bitch!

"Harry?" Sariah asked from right in front of him. She sounded shocked.

"Hmph." Harry responded. Someone stepped up on either side of him and looped their hands around his elbows, walking with him, leading him down the middle of the street. Somehow Harry could tell it was Vosenn and Gray. The walk through the city was awkward; Harry finally got used to trusting his friend and cousin and moved forward casually, but he could hear the sounds around him of the City waking up, the smells of baking bread, the air warming, and the feeling of the sun on his skin. He wanted the blindfold off.

They stopped.

"It looks like we're here," Vosenn said quietly. "It's a really big fancy building. It looks like the biggest building in the City."

"It's a City Hall I think," Gray said. "There are a lot of people coming in and out, but they're all moving to the side because they see us coming. Silents wouldn't be a very common sight to the City."

"Stairs," Vosenn warned him. "Lot's of them."

They walked up the stairs together; Harry didn't know where all his companions were but knew they would be near. Harry wondered how Enna was doing without him.

Once they entered through the door their footsteps echoed, the air was cooler inside the stone building and smelled of parchment.

"Who is in charge here?" Aeyris demanded haughtily somewhere ahead.

"That would be the City Lords," said a male voice. "I'll take you to them right away." He sounded overwhelmed and a little hoarse.

"Tell us about the City Lords," Iz asked while they were walking.

"There are three City Lords," the man told them. "The Rural Lord, who is in charge of anything associated with Origin outside of the City. The Outland Lord, in charge of anything associated with foreigners and the outlands, and the Lord of the City. They're usually meeting people and involved with decision making, but I'll call an immediate meeting for your arrival. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes," Aeyris said. "Tell them that the Silent Queen is here to speak with them over an urgent matter."

"Right away, your highness." A door opened. "Will this meeting room suffice?"

"No it will not," the Queen said briskly. "I request something without windows."

"Without windows?" He asked, confused. "Certainly, we have something appropriate."

They walked further, and turned. Another door opened.

"Thank you," Aeyris said, as if it pained her to say those words.

Once in the room with the door closed Vosenn undid the knot of his blindfold and removed it. There was a long, wood rectangular table with many wooden chairs on each side.

Aeyris looked at them speculatively. "I'll sit in the middle, Enna you sit on one side, and Iz on the other. Sava, Gheric, you can seat yourselves too. Everyone else stand behind us. Harry, glare menacingly. I know you're good at that."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. He wasn't sure if he wanted to be her menacing pet bodyguard, especially since these humans hadn't done anything wrong other than be human. Maybe I should give them a thumbs up and see how they react. A short time later, the door opened and four grown men and a woman came in. Three of the men looked calm and calculating, well dressed. The other man was wearing a long robe, carrying a couple books. He looked frazzled and dusty. The woman wore a long elaborate dress with lots of ruffles, and was draped with sparkling jewelry.

The woman looked at Aeyris appreciatively, taking in her looks and attire. "So Philip here tells me that the Silents are ruled by a Queen? How remarkable," She said approvingly.

The men were thrown off balance that the woman had spoken first, and Aeyris smiled, liking that.

"My name is Lord Laike," said a tall man with white and gray hair. "I'm the rural lord, meaning I would normally handle anything Origin-related, but this is a bit of surprise, isn't it? You've never come to the City before, your highness."

"That is correct," she said stiffly.

"We rarely see Silents in the City at all," Lord Laike added.

"I am the Lord of the City," said a shorter man with thinning hair. He was bulky, but muscular, and dynamic. "I'm called Lord Duran. This is the Outland Lord, Lord Marr, Philip our Head Historian, who knows most about Silents in the building, and my wife Rosabel." The others all seated themselves.

"We have enough chairs," Lord Duran said. He took the seat across from Aeyris, clearly in charge. The other Lords sat on either side of him; the Historian sat with Lord Laike. They seemed very familiar with each other, exchanging a glance unreadable to Harry. "The others can make themselves comfortable."

Aeyris shrugged. "No, it's what they do."

"Your highness—" Philip began, but stopped immediately upon receiving a sharp look from Lord Duran.

"Not now," Lord Duran said. "Let our guests introduce themselves first."

"I am Queen Aeyris," Aeyris said. "This is my daughter, Enna, next in line with the throne, but that probably won't happen in your lifetime." The humans didn't get it. "General Iz..." she continued.

General Iz, Harry contemplated the title. I suppose that's what he is.

"Sava and Gheric, two of my people, and behind us is one of General Iz's many armies."

"An army?" Lord Marr asked. "They look a little young, don't they?"

"They're perfectly capable," Aeyris assured him.

"It's a very small army," Lord Marr pointed out.

"Our armies don't need to be big to be powerful," Aeyris said calmly.  
"How big are your armies?"

Lord Marr looked at the table, fishing for a reply.

"Was an army necessary to bring along?" Lord Duran asked, sounding slightly alarmed. "Is there cause for one?"

Aeyris smiled. "It's just personal security for my daughter."

"Your highness," Phillip said, looking like he was unable to be silent any longer. "Is that a..." he trailed off, looking at Harry, unsure how to tactfully phrase his question.

"Yes it is," Iz said, not needing the words.

He means me, of course, Harry thought sardonically. Here we go again... as soon as possible I'm going to put my amulet back on and go back to being the regular old Boy-Who-Lived.

Philip paled and put his face in his hands, taking a deep breath.

"Hold on," Lord Duran asked, irritated and a bit alarmed by the Head Historian. "Philip, what were you going to say? What's going on here?"

"The army," Philip said. "I know a few things about Silent armies."

"You can explain, we won't be offended," Iz assured him.

"The one in black," Philip explained to his fellow humans. "Is what the natives call 'touched'."

"Oh!" Lord Laike said, knowing the term. "Touched by the Gods." He looked to the Queen. "I'm from a far-off human territory, that's why I'm the Rural Lord. Most of the humans in the City are humans who have lived here for many generations. Mixed among them are Outlanders, and those who struggle with the fact that on Origin, it's taken completely for granted that the Gods are real, nearby, and sometimes

intervene. The other Lords aren't as familiar with the local lore as I am."

"So you're telling me that this fellow right here has been altered by the Gods themselves?" Lord Duran asked, sounding uncertain.

"Yes," Philip said. He'd never looked twice at Enna; the myth of the Healers didn't seem to have gone as far as that of the Cursed. "The God of Destruction and the God of Darkness. My point is, he's dangerous and highly volatile."

The other humans looked extremely alarmed. I can't even go anywhere without getting attention and people freaking out, Harry thought exasperatedly.

"Don't worry," Queen Aeyris said. "He'll be fine." She looked pleased. Her smile faltered for a second, and Harry figured she was remembering the circumstances of Axe's incident, because she turned to look at him uncertainly. "You will, right?" she asked. Harry nodded. He was considerably more tolerant of his situation now that he could look forward to escaping.

Her hesitance only increased their discomfort. Harry stood behind Aeyris and leveled his gaze at them calmly.

"So what brings you here?" Lord Duran asked, changing the topic.

"Ice Lizards," Aeyris said, getting right to the point. "Have you seen any?"

They were quiet, puzzled. All of a sudden, Lord Laike slammed his fist on the table, startling everyone. "The white monsters!" he said. "I've been dealing with reports of them for weeks now!"

"So have the other races of Origin," The Queen said. "What do the reports say?"

"Attack, abduction. Only rare occurrences, so no panic yet."

"You haven't told us about something like that?" Duran asked Laike.

"I've been trying to arrange a meeting, but you've both been so busy. It took the Queen of the Silents to get you here," Laike pointed out.

"We have had an attack and abduction too, and several sightings," Aeyris said. "We don't know where they come from. They're not native to Origin. Have there been any sightings in the City?"

"Only on the outer limits."

"What about your portals, are there people watching them?"

"At all times."

"Definitely no Ice Lizards?"

Laike shook his head. "No."

"Excuse me," Lord Marr said. "I have some guests waiting for me. This is clearly more important, but if you DON'T need me..."

"Go ahead," Lord Duran told him. "I have other business as well, and since we've all met, now, I think you found who your need to talk to about this your Highness."

"I think... I think my daughter may like to see more than the inside of the meeting room," Aeyris told them, glancing at Enna uncertainly. Enna looked to Harry and smiled.

"That might be nice," she said.

"Shall we all find a nicer place to continue this conversation, since it will be less formal?" Laike said. "In fact, you can call me Alexander if you wish." He got to his feet and led the way to the door. As they walked forward, Harry caught an odd look on Gray's face.

"Sorry Gray," he whispered. "Hearing your brother's name must be hard."

Gray looked around to see if anyone was listening, but they weren't. He leaned toward Harry and whispered back. "No, that's not it... Alexander Laike is my grandfather, Alexander's namesake."

Harry stopped in his tracks. "What?!" He asked quietly. "The Rural City Lord is Aunt Amanda's father?"

"Yes!"

"Does he know...?"

"No, he thinks Mother is in the countryside somewhere, they haven't spoken in years. He doesn't even know I exist, I can't say anything, especially not..." he moved his wings. "Like this, he doesn't know about Dad."

"Oh, that's just—" Harry froze.

"Harry?" Gray asked. "What is it?"

Through the door, Harry could see Lord Marr's guest was waiting for him. It was Albus Dumbledore. Harry stepped to the side trying to put the wall in between him and Dumbledore, than craned his neck to peek around at his Headmaster.

"There you are," Lord Marr was saying. "Wonderful. We need to move out of the hall now though, we have... danger... coming through..."

"My students are back that way with the guide and the other teachers, is there something I should know?" Dumbledore asked.

Wow... Dumbledore is just a couple yards from me... I wonder what would happen—

"Are we going, or not?" Vosenn interrupted Harry's thoughts.

"Yeah..." Harry touched his face, remembering Dumbledore in the hall. "Uh... blindfold?"

"Too right," she said, pulling it out.

When Harry was led out, he could hear voices stop speaking ahead of him, and he would have given anything for x-ray vision to look through his blindfold and see his friends again. The silence was killing him.

“... move over, Hermione.”

“Shh!”

Harry couldn’t breathe. Keep walking, keep walking...

“So, should we take your daughter on a tour?” Laike was saying.  
“With her security, of course.”

“Enna?” Aeyris asked. “What would you like to do?”

“The ocean?” She asked meekly.

“I’m sorry Enna, it’s too far away.”

Enna sighed audibly. “I’d like to rest. I’m tired and hot.”

“You there!” Laike called to someone. “The Queen and I will be going to my office so she can see some reports. I need a nice cool dark room for her daughter, bring her there.”

“I’m just tired of all these voices, and people... I just want to be alone,” Enna said after some time walking.

“Alone?” Vosenn asked. “Of course, we can wait outside.” She sounded surprised.

“On second thought,” Enna added, “Harry can be there, he’s quiet.”

They stepped into another room, the door closed, and Harry found the knot to his blindfold and took it off. Opening his eyes, he was surprised to find Enna looking at him with searching eyes.

“Can they hear us talking through the door?” she asked urgently.

Wondering what she was up to, Harry leaned toward the door and listened. Any sounds from the others in the hallway were completely blocked. "No."

"Harry, I saw the look on your face when you saw that old man with Lord Marr. Who was he?" She demanded.

"You know," Harry said, "I like it when you get confident. It seems to happen when you're distracted." I wonder why she wants to know so badly?

"Seriously, Harry," she repeated, "Who was he?"

Harry sighed. "I'm not from the Pit, nobody seems to believe me but it's true. I come from their world. That man was Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster from the school I go to. Was there a crowd of people down the hall... students our age, and maybe a woman with her hair pulled back under a pointed hat?"

"Oh!" She exclaimed. "I noticed the hat! It was the strangest hat I'd ever seen. They were there."

"Those are my friends and teachers."

Enna sat silently, contemplating. "You really want to go home, don't you?"

Harry was perplexed. "Yes, of course. But... I mean..." he was flustered, unsure what to disclose.

"I'll help you," she announced.

"You don't want to do that," Harry insisted. "You don't want to go against your mother like that, right?" It didn't seem like the right kind of mission for Enna.

Enna nodded vigorously, sending her long blond hair rippling. "Yes, I do! Maybe if she'd been nice to you it would be different, but she made you fight and get hurt!"

"I know, I know..." He looked at her speculatively. "Can you... keep a secret?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes!"

"Gray is my cousin."

"Really?" she asked. "That's wonderful, I really like him!"

"Hold on, I want him to come in for a second," Harry said.

"I'll get him." Enna opened the door a crack. "Gray can I speak with you?" she asked. There was a baffled silence.

"Sure," Gray said, stepping in. He tilted his head and raised his eyebrows at Harry, questioning wordlessly.

Harry waited until the door was closed. "Enna wants to help me escape," he explained.

"... REALLY?" Gray asked, astounded. Harry knew what he was thinking—it was a little out of character for her to do. But it would be even more out of character for her to deceive them. Then she must be serious.

"You realize this is something that you would have to keep from your mother, and everyone else? If she asks you would have to lie to her," Harry pointed out.

"Don't you get it?" Enna asked. "My mother barely talks to me at all! It's not even going to occur to her that I had anything to do with it. No one's even going to ask." She looked a little down.

Harry sighed. "I would do anything to get out of here. It's been such a gift to get to get to meet Gray, but I can't stay."

"The others truly care about him," Gray added, "but they honestly believe it's the best for him and everyone if he's a prisoner. It's brainwashed into them at the Academy. To Iz and the Queen, Harry's

just a weapon, a valuable resource that they can't afford to lose." He reached out and gripped one of Harry's gates. "So they did these, which are the real problem. If we'd managed to take get Harry away before they'd put them on, he might have been home already. They need to come off. Maybe then you could even port yourself home, Harry."

"That man in the hallway is the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Gray," Harry told him. "The students are here, I would have been here with them if I hadn't been so foolish as to be where I wasn't supposed to and stumble into a portal... maybe I could go back with them."

"If they're still here," Gray warned. "The gates are going to be difficult."

"... No, they won't," Enna interjected. "Because I know how to get them off."

The two cousins looked at her, stunned. "Really?" they both asked excitedly.

"I can't do it from here, we need to be back at the Pit, but yes. My mother doesn't know I've seen how to do it, either."

"Stop," the guide said.

"What is it?" Minerva McGonagall asked. "Is Dumbledore back with the foreign relations man?"

Ignoring her, the guide turned around. "In the time you've been on Origin, you've seen Centaurs, Bloodbeasts, the occasional Vineadrayad, and the Mermaids down at the ocean, right?"

Everyone nodded.

"Well there's one race you haven't seen, and you're about to," he said importantly.

"The Silents?" Hermione asked, remembering. "You said we wouldn't see any in the City."

"I didn't think you would, but I was wrong," the guide amended. "I want everyone to move to this side of the hall out of the way, and don't say anything."

The students and teachers moved back in the hall to where it came to a T and there would be space to stand aside. Down the hall came Dumbledore and a man wearing a maroon suit. They stood next to the students.

"Lord Marr says that danger's coming through," Dumbledore told them, looking slightly worried. "Silents."

Down the hall came a tall man who nodded to Lord Marr, followed by a row of people with large feathery wings. First two males and a female, and then a stunning woman with a gold dress and crown, a younger version of herself walking at her heels. Like the girl with the white wings and circlet, the next five were about the same age as the Hogwarts students. They were all dressed alike, except for one wearing only black pants. He stood out from the crowd. He was blindfolded, for one. His hair and wings were pitch black. On all of the others their wings, folded against their back, extended from the top of their head to about the back of their knees. On this one, the black wings started above his head and went nearly down to the floor. Unlike the older Silents, who hadn't even glanced in their direction, the younger ones looked at the students with interest almost warily. They stood around the blindfolded one protectively, leading him down the hall.

"Move over, Hermione," Ron whispered, trying to get see around her.

"Shh!" she hissed. The Silents walked away down the hall, and Dumbledore breathed a sigh of relief.

"The blindfolded one was one of the Portal Openers," their guide told them. "They actually open the portals at the portal central. Those portals are mostly established, but when they need to be re-opened or strengthened than one of the Portal Openers does it. They are the only ones who can open the portals, no one else. It seems to make

them mentally unstable, so they're always surrounded with other Silents to watch them."

Everyone was awed, looking down the hall where the Silents had disappeared.

## Chapter 15: Broken Gates

The wind felt glorious in Lily's hair as it lifted up off her neck and back and blew back from her ears. On either side of her, wings pumped steadily, and below her the ground was moving by quickly. James was sweating slightly where her hands were clasped over his shoulders. Lily looked to her right: Lexian and Amanda were flying the same way next to them; Amanda looked like she was enjoying the ride just as much. Amanda was pregnant, but not showing yet and had taken on little, if any, weight.

"They appear to have swept us off our feet!" Lily called to her.

"What dashing gentlemen!" Amanda responded, laughing. "Look, there's the path."

They landed with a thump next to a small worn path. It had looked small from above, but was wide and dusty as she stood on it.

"The City is that way," Amanda said, pointing. "You can feel the sea breeze already."

"Do you miss it?" Lexian asked her.

"Not really. The ocean, sometimes. I used to swim in it, and sometimes you would even see mermaids." Amanda turned to Lily. "All set, then? Any questions?"

"None, got it all." Lily was dressed in a way that was unfamiliar to her. In the Pit she normally wore pants with a knee-length dress over them, but she had a long dress on, out of some kind of unyielding shiny fabric, and a small hat that draped lace down over her face. She pulled a tiny purse out of her bag and hooked it over her arm, handing the bag to James. "How do I look?"

"Perfect!" Amanda said, thrilled. "One last thing," She stepped forward, and pulling some from her pack, applied lipstick to Lily's lips. James was chuckling at her.

"What?" Lily demanded.

"You look quite... unlike you, is all," he said, and she glared, although jokingly.

"She looks like a proper Lady," Amanda said. "Someone whom I would have associated with, three years ago."

"Off I go," Lily said, and headed down the path, walking backwards to wave to them.

"We're going to go eat lunch on the cliffs," Amanda said. "We'll keep an eye out and come down to the path when we see you coming back."

Walking through the city, she saw many women dressed like her, and no one looked at her twice. None had the shiny material, but Amanda had told her that was expensive and only very high-class women wore it. Lily could appreciate the City's beauty, the white marble-looking stones reflected the midday sun, and from just about anywhere in the city you could see the ocean due to the sloping land. The sky was clear, the ocean was very blue, and there was one small island far away on the horizon.

The downtown buildings loomed above her now; unlike the rest of the City they had elaborate trim. Scanning the street, she located a house that had many spiky bushes in front of it with bright purple flowers, and as she walked closer through the crowd she saw a hawk engraved artistically in the stone above the door: exactly how Amanda had described it. Lily walked up the front steps and knocked.

The door opened, it was an authoritative mannered middle-aged woman, who looked at her with slight skepticism. "Yes?"

"I want to speak with Alexander Laike," Lily said confidently.

The severe look melted away. "Of course, wait here, I'll check his rooms to see if he's in."

Breathing a sigh of relief as soon as the woman was gone, Lily was glad that Alexander Laike still lived at this residence. It had been three years, after all.

When the middle-aged woman returned, she was accompanied by a very tall, thin man with salt and pepper hair, and a face with deep wrinkles, perhaps in his fifties. Lily thought he looked like a nice man.

"How may I help you, young woman?" he asked with a friendly smile.

"Good-day, Mr. Laike!" Lily said confidently, smiling widely. "I've been out of town for a couple years, and now that I'm back in town I wanted to visit with my dear friend Amanda, is she in?"

His smile faltered slightly, before returning as if frozen to his face. "I regret to tell you that she's left. She moved back to her mother's town three years ago, I'm afraid."

"Oh, what a shame! She seemed to like it here, why did she leave?" Lily said, in mock disappointment. She'd added that part just for spite.

"You haven't heard?" Amanda's father asked, puzzled.

"Well I asked about her, and people just smiled in a peculiar way and didn't answer. I don't know why," Lily lied smoothly.

"Good-day then, I have business to attend to," he said curtly, and turned to leave.

The middle-aged woman walked her to the door and held it open. "It was quite a scandal," she divulged.

Walking down the street, Lily giggled to herself. Meeting up with James, Lexian, and Amanda, she retold her experience. Her best friend Amanda was pleased.

Two days later they were somewhere very different. This time, it was a very small rural town with a few small cottage farmhouses spaced far apart. They staked out the area for a couple hours, watching from trees. One farm, a very large one, had several cottages grouped together, and that was the one they watched. Sometime later they saw a woman in a knee-length skirt and patched apron walk from one of the cottages to the other, and Amanda pointed excitedly.

"That's her!" she said.

The brothers stayed hidden in the tree while Lily and Amanda dropped behind the bushes for Lily to change once again.

"Thanks so much for the help Lily," Amanda said. "I owe you a favor."

"Not really, this is an adventure. The Pit is interesting but... sunlight! Look how pale we are." Lily giggled. "Hopefully your mother doesn't mistake me for a walking cheese."

"That would be awkward, wouldn't it?" Amanda straightened the bandana over Lily's red curls. "Good luck!"

Lily sashayed down the garden path through the gate, noting the ripe vegetables overflowing the yard. It was a very welcoming place. Lily decided she liked it better than the City.

She knocked on the door, and to her luck, the woman they'd seen from the tree answered. "Giday, Missus," she said cheerfully with a practiced dialect.

"Cainee helpa dear?" Amanda's mother asked.

Lily tried to decipher what she'd said. "Yep," she replied. "Does ma' childstime girl still live hereplace?" She hoped she was getting it right. "Amanda?"

"Na." Amanda's mother shook her head. "She gone ta City, long whiles ago," She explained. "Wit' her Da."

"M'thanks, Missus," she said with a purposefully awkward curtsy.

"Bye now," Amanda's mother said, waving, as Lily went back down the path, then closed the door. When the house was out of sight she ducked behind the bushes and backtracked to the place the others were hiding.

"That was fun," she said, and reached up so James could lift her back up to perch with them in the tree. "Amanda, she thinks that you never left the City."

Amanda was nodding. "Alright. All is well. If they'd been worrying, or panicking, I would have relieved them. If they're not, that's convenient. This is the first time my parents' big split worked to my advantage."

"Does it bother you?" Lexian asked. "You never get to see them anymore."

Amanda pointed to the lush green farm. "This is where I grew up, Lexian. I had a wonderful childhood. I love my parents very much... but now I've made my own life for myself. It's unfortunate they're not part of it, but things happened as they happened. I'm happy now." She touched her stomach. "I have a lot to look forward to." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Though, I want to name the first one after one of my parents. After that we can use Silent names."

Lexian nodded. "Of course."

Amanda noticed Lily was grinning at them. "What?" she asked, laughing.

"I'm just glad to have met all of you." Lily basked in the sun. They did the return trip as one big flight. The others were all extremely exhausted, but Harry didn't feel any strain, and he carried Enna the whole way. She'd fallen asleep on his shoulder for most of the flight, breathing deeply right next to his ear. The uncomfortable bit for him was that he couldn't see where he was flying, but he could hear the others around and ahead of him and followed well enough. When they got to Everdark Harry didn't know whether to be relieved as he took the blindfold off, or fearful of returning to that particular place.

For a moment he was caught up by how dramatic the scene was: sheer dark cliffs, wings gracefully slowing their rhythmic movement, bringing them down toward the mountain top. The Queen and Iz went ahead, caught up by the feeling of being home.

Sava came up next to him, sweaty but smiling. Harry hadn't had a chance to talk to neither her nor her husband Gheric. "It's been interesting traveling with you, Harry."

"Thanks," he said automatically, and then wondered, "How so?"

"Well I've been involved in research involving portals, and I was alerted when you were about to port into the bottom of the Pit. I notified the Queen and she went down to meet you," she told him. "It's been on my mind a lot lately, and I wanted to see who this person actually was. Maybe sometime we can see if you could recreate that moment, and open a portal again."

"You'd have to ask the Queen about that," he pointed out. That explains how the Queen managed to be waiting for me as I got out of the portal.

Sava nodded. "We'll see."

"Enna," Harry said, shrugging his shoulder slightly, moving her head to rouse her.

"Hmm?" she asked, opening one eye sleepily.

"Wake up, we're back."

"Nuh uh," she protested, snuggling her head back into his shoulder. "I like flying with you," she said.

"What's this?" he asked exaggeratedly. "She speaks! And here I was, thinking she was still asleep."

"I am," she replied, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Aw, look at you two," Jon said from behind Harry. "So cute."

"Jon!" Harry laughed slightly. "I'm doing my job." It is kind of a nice job though, isn't it?

"I know," Jon explained, "I'm going to make fun of you anyway, aren't I?"

"Catch me first," Harry said, speeding up, aiming for the opening of the Pit. "Hold on tight!" He warned Enna.

"What are you do—" She started saying, but trailed off. Harry wrapped his wings tightly around both him and Enna, and they fell like a rock.

The air whistled around them, but inside the cocoon of his wings Harry and Enna were snug. She screamed as they fell, but eventually it turned to giddy laughter. Harry looked up and could see others, everyone but Sava and Gheric had followed suit. Iz and Aeyris were soaring down in a wide spiral, and Harry plummeted between them in the blink of an eye.

"Bye mother!" Enna yelled in that split second. The Queen looked down, astonished.

Eventually Harry saw the ledge of the Queen's Hall down below them, and opened his wings, slowing down insanely fast. He flapped a couple times to gain equilibrium, and landed neatly on the ledge. Enna looked at him, eyes wide and shocked, and then threw her head back and laughed. At that moment someone plummeted by, unable to pull the same abrupt stop. Gray did somewhat a better job of it, and Vosenn and Sariah were intelligent enough to slow down considerably earlier, and landed just as Jon flapped up from below to join them. Sariah smirked at Jon jokingly.

"Nobody says anything," Jon ordered. "Not a word!"

Harry couldn't help himself, "Haha."

"Hey!"

"Haha isn't a word, Jon," Harry explained.

Jon rolled his eyes. "That was still pretty dark though," he admitted.

"So what now?" Harry asked, looking at Vosenn. Vosenn usually had all the answers.

"We walk Enna to her quarters, and then bring you to the Keep," Vosenn said.

That's right, put me back on my shelf, Harry thought.

"Then we might meet with Iz, so he can tell us what a terrible job we did," Jon said, but since it was Jon Harry knew he wasn't serious.

"And then the rest of us will probably go home," Sariah said happily. "Tomorrow we'll visit as usual."

"Alright," Harry said, putting down Enna. He looked at Gray carefully. Gray winked. When he goes home, Gray and Ren can come up with a plan. I believe this is actually going to happen.

They walked Enna back to her room, she smiled at them gratefully and waved goodbye. As they were leaving they ran into Iz and the Queen.

"Enna is in her room, we're bringing Harry to the Keep," Vosenn told them, and the adults nodded.

Aeyris added, "You can all go home after that and get a well deserved break."

Vosenn looked impressed by the compliment. They all flew down further in the Pit, solemn now as they reached the Keep.

"Sleep well, Harry." Gray said as they waved good-bye. It was reassuring.

Harry didn't sleep well, he wasn't as tired out by the trip as everyone else seemed to be, and he read for a couple hours, before lying awake staring at the ceiling. He wasn't seeing the ceiling; in his head memories were playing like a movie. He revisited the times he shared with his friends Ron and Hermione, and walked the halls of Hogwarts.

There was a faint knock on the door, and Harry was startled, expecting absolutely no one. He went to the door and reached through the bars to open the solid door and see who it was.

On the other side stood Enna, looking delighted to have surprised him. She was wearing a white dress and her hair was plaited into a long pale braid that wrapped around her head.

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Enna?" he whispered, "What are you doing in the Keep?"

"Hurry up!" Someone snapped from behind her. "We haven't got all night." The person stepped up next to her and handed Harry something soft through the bars, which Harry accepted without a second thought. It was Lexian. He looked cross.

"Decent people should be sleeping," he complained, looking over his shoulder. "Right friend?"

Someone else stepped up beside Lexian; it was the guard from the Hall. Harry was thrown off by the sight at first, something was odd about it. Then he realized that Lexian was dressed identical to the guard, both in uniform.

"Too right," the guard agreed, pulling out his keys. After unlocking the door, he turned and shuffled away. Lexian winked. Looking down, Harry found that the soft object had been a bag. He looked back to Enna, she was glowing with excitement.

Turning, Harry quickly swept all of his things, including the books he'd been reading and even the pile of feathers next to his bed into the bag, and Lexian took it from him as he stepped out of the cage. Enna and Lexian walked on either side of him as they headed toward the stairs, past the guard who didn't bother glancing in their direction. At a casual, slow pace, they took the stairs up to the landing. Stepping through the door and out onto the floor of the Pit, Harry didn't look back, not even once. He looked up instead. "What's the plan?" he asked Lexian.

"We fly to a certain tunnel opening where Ren will be waiting to lead us through a detour around the guards that hover around the Queen's Hall, and then we'll go to our home for a short while."

Harry looked Enna over again. "You look like a real Healer," he commented as they took off from the ground. She smiled, pleased. He noticed that she flew differently in this space; Enna's wings weren't suited for the gliding and swooping he adored so much, but while he needed lots of room and a direction to go when flying, she was capable of much more delicate maneuvering. Her small wings moved quickly, meaning she could hover much more effectively.

They didn't pass anyone traveling through the Pit, and found a ledge with a small tunnel opening where he squeezed in.

"What's the password?" Ren asked from right in front of him, looking him right in the face, smirking.

"It's me, Harry," he told her. "You can see me perfectly fine."

"That's not the password," she said, but started down the passageway with Harry at her heels.

"It's not the time for passwords," Harry said, asking the others, "Have you heard anything about a password?"

"No," Enna said.

"It's a joke," Ren admitted.

"Not a very funny one," he mumbled, and she kicked his shin. "We're on an important mission, Ren!"

"Yeah, but it's Ren," Lexian pointed out from the back of the line.

"Really? I hadn't noticed!" Harry exclaimed.

"Shh!" Ren admonished. "You're being too loud." She kicked him in the shin again.

"This is supposed to be an amazing and stealthy escape," Harry said, amused but hesitant to rejoice just yet. He was just desperately hoping nothing went wrong. A set-back after this would crush him. "You're killing it."

"Correction: this is an amazing and stealthy rescue," Ren giggled. It occurred to Harry she was probably trying to distract him from having to worry about their progress, and he was grateful.

I just wish she wouldn't kick me in the shins, he thought.

When the tunnel wound around back toward the Pit, Harry found that they'd come out far above the Queen's Hall, a short trip to his home-on-Origin, his aunt and uncle's house. If I were given the chance, it would have become my real home. But I didn't get that chance, and they're never going to give me one.

They made it to the ledge unseen, and disappeared, safe inside for now.

Amanda was waiting for them, and beamed to see them with Harry in tow.

"This is your home?" Enna asked Ren. "I like it."

"Princess!" Amanda said, pleased. "Oh, she's adorable." She enveloped Enna in a big hug. "Thank you, dear."

Enna looked comfortable among them, Harry was amazed how all this had come together. "You guys..." was all he could say, shaking his head.

Enna reached into a pocket almost invisible in the folds of her dress and pulled out a small rock. "This is it," she told them.

"It is?" Harry asked, puzzled. "It's what?"

"I borrowed it from my mother's room. She keeps it there so no one else can reach it... well I snuck in." She grabbed at one of his hands, pulling it toward herself. "Hold up your arms."

Harry held his arms out in front of himself. Taking the small, seemingly normal looking rock, she touched it to each of his gates. The markings on them glowed, the spells flaring up brightly before winking out.

"Silents like doing magic with stones, don't they?" Harry commented.

"It holds our magic well," Gray said from the sidelines. "Good to see you, Harry."

Harry looked down at his gates. "Are they going to... come off, or anything?"

Everyone looked at them. "I don't think so, they shouldn't be functional anyone, but you have to get them off separately," Enna said.

Harry was momentarily exasperated. "Sure. Seamless metal fused over my arms. Shouldn't be a problem."

"Don't be down, Harry!" Amanda insisted. "You're getting out of here, aren't you?"

"I'm all packed, and everything," Ren said.

"You're right Amanda," Harry said. He looked at Ren. "What?"

"I said I'm all packed. Ready to go!" She held up a bag and slung it over her shoulder.

Harry looked at her blankly. "Oh. I didn't know you were coming with me." He considered the idea. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

She smiled at him sweetly. "Harry, do you honestly think I belong here?"

"I don't know."

"That's just it. Neither do I. My family is here, but nobody looks at me like a real person. I need to see more than the Pit, I need to go places. I need to learn where I belong." She shrugged ruefully. "Here, I'm a freak."

"There's another thing you need to know," Amanda said. "We're going to go to the porting point and I want to go with you to the City. It's the time I saw my father again, and introduce him to his granddaughter. I'll come back here, and Ren will continue on with you."

"And if I can't go to Earth with you, I'll stay in the City." Ren added.

"What if I can't port all of us to the City?" Harry asked.

"I've never heard of a Cursed who couldn't port," Amanda said. "If you can't figure it out right that moment, I'll go stay and you can carry Ren and fly there."

"I should go put this back before anyone realizes I'm gone," Enna interrupted, holding up the little rock.

"Hold on a minute," Harry said, and then swept her up in a big hug. She felt so familiar to him. She belonged there. "Thank you, so very much. I'm proud of you, traveling as far as the City."

She squeezed him. "I wish you could stay. But I saw the look on your face when you saw the sky, and I knew that you belonged somewhere up there, and not down here."

"I have one last favor to ask," Harry said.

"Name it."

"Will you take care of my Hand for me? I think this is going to be rough for them," Harry said. It was one of the things he'd been thinking about; they existed as a unit for the sole purpose of caring for him. What happens if you take the Cursed out of the Hand?

She bit her lip thoughtfully. "I think I have something in mind," she assured him. "Thank you for understanding me Harry."

Gray and Harry hugged. "You need to get going," Gray announced. "It's not goodbye forever."

"It's been a gift meeting all of you," Harry said, and they left. Enna headed down, Gray stayed. Harry flew upwards carrying Ren, and Lexian carried Amanda. The whole time Harry couldn't hear anything but his heart pounding.

"Don't die, I'd fall." Ren warned. "Calm down."

It seemed forever before they got to the top of the Pit. They moved quickly so nobody could take a good look at them, but the Pit was still just about empty. Flying up and out of the Pit was like taking a deep breath of fresh air after holding your breath for a long time, it was a relief.

"You're grinning," Ren informed him.

They didn't stop there, but flew off for a minute to a nearby mountain top, and landed on the far side, out of sight. Lexian and Amanda shared a moment, holding both hands.

"I'll be back soon," She said. Lexian put his hand on Harry's shoulder, gave him a meaningful nod, and flew back toward the Pit. Harry was left with Amanda and Ren, looking at him.

"Have either of you ported before?" Harry asked, and they shook their heads. "Okay... group hug, then."

He put an arm over each of their shoulders, and they all squeezed together. He folded his wings slightly over them in an embrace. "You know what's funny? If Queen Aeyris hadn't brought me along with her to the City, I wouldn't have anywhere to visualize right now." He closed his eyes. "So, thank you, Aeyris, for making this fine escape possible."

Harry tried to picture every little detail of the City as he last saw it, even the very spot he wanted to be standing, as best he could. His

skin tingled for a second, and he opened his eyes to find the three of them standing on the ridge looking down at the City.

"Wow!" Ren exclaimed, pointing at the houses. "That's... that's... different. How odd!"

"You are in for an eye-opening experience, Ren," her mother told her. "The part of the world you've seen is such a tiny piece of the big picture."

Harry reached for his belt, untying the little strings that held the pouch shut. First he pulled out his casting stone, and hung it around his neck. Then he put on the disguise amulet. He tried to look over his back to see what was happening as his wings folded up, disappearing into his back. He felt strangely naked.

Ren admired the amulet's result. "Madalena is a genius."

Harry pulled out a shirt and put that on too, covering both necklaces. Together they went down the path, walking the empty streets toward the downtown area.

"Since the amulet was suppressing your Cursed nature fairly effectively, I can imagine you don't have to worry about the sun-sickness," Ren told Harry.

"I'm not," he replied.

"So how are we going to find him?" Ren asked her mother. "Grampa, that is."

"When I lived with him we lived in a townhouse, but he'll be living in the Courtyard now," Amanda said. "The Courtyard is a large square behind the City Building surrounded by the biggest, most expensive houses. The Lords always live there." She smiled. "I can't believe he's the Rural Lord. He always wanted that position."

"Tell us what happened," Harry asked. "We have a ways to walk."

Amanda sighed. "My father and I didn't part on good terms. We didn't part at all, really. He never knew I was leaving."

"Really?" Ren was intrigued. "You ran away?"

Amanda nodded. "I grew up in a little farming town a far away from here. My mother loved it there; my father grew sick of it and decided he wanted to go to the City. Mother simply wasn't interested in going along with him, and they got into fighting so much about it that finally he was decided to go whether she was coming or not. I was left with the decision of which parent to live with. I was about Alexander's age at the time, and I wanted to see something new, so I went with my father. It was a long trip to the City, and it was really hard at first. I had a really strong accent, but the City has such a variety of people coming through here that it didn't matter. My father had always educated me, and so academically I fit in with the other high-class women. I made a lot of friends. My father and I were well respected; everyone thought I was pretty and intelligent. Lord Duran was Lord of the City already at that point, a very powerful and influential man. Father's greatest desire was to be Rural Lord, which has a complicated election process, and he really needed Lord Duran on his side. Lord Duran had a son my age, his name was Jors. I wasn't interested in him, but he was determined that we should be together, and then finally proposed to marry me. My father knew that if Jors and I got married, Lord Duran would guarantee that he would get the position he wanted. He told me he needed me to marry Jors Duran." Amanda sighed. "He pressured me about it, and we fought. He was being selfish and thinking only of himself. Finally I had enough, and I left."

"That's horrible," Ren said. "I would hate it if someone told me I had to marry someone. I might even have to stab them. Good for you, Mom."

"It didn't go that well, actually," Amanda winced. "I didn't really know what I was doing, and I left on my own and in a hurry. I wasn't prepared, and I got lost. Lexian was flying over the desert when he found me wandering aimlessly, about to be attacked by Bloodbeasts."

"No way! Dad rescued you?" Ren did a little jump, excited by the story.

"Yes, he did. Lexian said he couldn't leave me in the desert to be eaten, and offered to fly me to my mother's house himself. It was a long flight, it took about a week. I think we started going really slow near the end, though. We got to my home town, but before I got to the farm Lexian asked me if I'd go home with him, instead. I was a little bit awed, you know, here was a Silent of all men wanting to take me home. I had wanted adventure, and there it was. I said yes, and ended up staying in the Pit."

"What about your parents?" Harry asked.

"As far as I know, they have no idea where I've been. They haven't talked since my father left... my mother is the kind of woman to hold a grudge. My mother doesn't know I ever even left the City, and my father thinks I went back to the farm. I'm really happy for him that he got the position, even without me there as a bargaining chip. I heard it was a bit of a scandal when I disappeared."

"Gray says he doesn't know about Lexian," Harry added.

Amanda nodded. "Yes, nothing about Silents, you two. My father would never understand. And neither of you have that trademark accent from the area I grew up in, so we're going to say I settled in Rutberd. It's a small town far enough away that I wouldn't visit, but close enough that you wouldn't have an accent. Furthermore, it's the nearest human town to the Pit. This is the Courtyard!" she announced, spreading her arms wide. "Now my little darlings use that amazing eyesight of yours and read the plaques on the doors. Find me 'Alexander Laike'."

"Right over there," Ren pointed. They were surrounded by fancy mansions, and the Courtyard in the center was a small green patch with a fountain on it.

They strolled up to the front door, and knocked. Then they waited a long while.

"It's the middle of the night, mother," Ren pointed out.

"Nonsense. I'm his daughter," Amanda said, knocking louder.

Finally the door opened and a light shined out on them, and they squinted to see an elderly woman in her nightgown holding a lamp.

"Are you the housekeeper?" Amanda asked cheerfully. The woman nodded slightly, looking out at them disbelievingly.

"Wretched time of night to bang on doors!" The woman said crossly, pushing her white bedhead hair out of her face. "What do you want?"

"Can you get me Lord Laike, please?" Amanda asked.

"Have you gone mental?" The woman demanded, shaking her lamp at them. "Lord Laike is sleeping!"

"Well then in the morning tell him his daughter stopped by, but had to leave because the housekeeper wouldn't wake him. I wish you luck finding a new job." Amanda's smile didn't falter.

"Oh," said the old woman abruptly, and turned and scurried away into the house, leaving the door ajar.

"Shall we make ourselves comfortable?" Amanda asked Ren and Harry, who nodded and walked in. There was a front hall covered in paintings depicting the countryside, and then a large sitting room with nice furniture. They seated themselves. It sunk in that they'd done it, Harry was free.

"... Amanda?" Alexander Laike said, standing in a doorway.  
"Amanda?"

"Hello Father!" She said, taking in his appearance. "You've gotten older. Congratulations on becoming a Lord."

He stared at her, incredulous. "What are you doing, coming by in the middle of the night after nearly 20 years?"

"I had to come now; I can only stay a short while and I wanted to say hello." She got up and found herself in the middle of a desperate hug.

"You have no idea how badly I felt about it all after you left," Laike swore, shaking his head.

"I'd like you to meet my nephew Harry," Amanda said, stepping back. Laike looked at Harry, surprised. He didn't seem to have noticed that there was anyone other than Amanda in the room. "And my daughter Ren."

Laike looked at Ren in amazement. "My granddaughter? I have a granddaughter?"

"Yes you do," Amanda looked pleased at his reaction.

"Do I have any more grandchildren?" Laike asked.

Amanda nodded. "I have two sons older than Ren, my firstborn Alexander and Gray."

Laike looked like there were tears in his eyes. "You named your firstborn Alexander?"

Amanda nodded again. "That's right! Ren and Harry, the son of my husband's brother, are going to be in the City for a couple days, and I was wondering if you'd take them tonight."

"Of course they can stay here," Laike said. "In fact, I insist."

Amanda and her father talked for another hour or so. Amanda told him about her life and that she was happy, leaving out any bits about Silents or the Pit, just speaking about her husband and children. At that time she started looking at Harry pointedly and tilting her head toward the door.

"I've pre-arranged transportation back," Amanda explained, and promised to visit again some time. Harry walked her out, waited until she'd said her goodbyes and they walked down the path until out of sight before stepping behind a bush. From there Harry ported the

both of them back to the mountain top near the Pit, where Lexian stood waiting. They must have decided on a time to meet back here, Harry thought.

They waved good-bye and Harry ported himself to the City behind the very same bush, walking back to Lord Laike's house so that he and Ren could plan their next move.

## Chapter Sixteen: A Chance

Harry woke up slowly, gazing at the ceiling. I escaped yesterday. Right out of the Keep itself, right under Aeyris' nose, with help from her very own daughter, how ironic is that? And I ported for the very first time! I don't believe it.

Harry sat up and looked around at the guest bedroom he was in. It was a little girly and frilly, but comfortable, and there was a big window on the wall with a window bench. He got up and went over to sit, looking out. He had an ocean view, all the white houses framing the bright blue sea, picture perfect. He moved his shoulders; his back was itchy, achy. He tried to reach over his shoulder to scratch, but couldn't reach. Finally he dug through his bag for a comb he had in there, and used it as an extension to relieve some of the itchiness. Probably a side effect of the amulet reactivating. It was strange, how much he missed his wings. They were special to him now.

His stomach rumbled with hunger, and so he put some fresh clothes on and walked out the door. He looked around trying to remember where exactly he was in Alexander Laike's big mansion, and after wandering down the hall a short ways he found the wide staircase. The staircase reminded him of those at Hogwarts, and he smiled. Hogwarts, here I come.

At the bottom of the stairs he could hear voices from another room, and followed the sound until he found himself in a dining room. Ren and her grandfather were there already, conversing over breakfast.

"Good morning!" Ren said cheerfully.

"You would be my grand-nephew, then. Not blood relative, but still family," Laike gestured to the food. "Would you care for some breakfast?"

Harry thanked him and sat next to Ren, looking at the food happily. "Real food!" he murmured, seeing butter and jam and other recognizable items.

"Ren, I saw how little you're traveling with," Laike said. "That can't possibly be everything you need."

Ren shrugged. "It was a long trip, I had to pack lightly."

"But you're going to go to Earth now, right?" Laike asked.

"I might," Ren said.

"You know you could stay with me?" Laike said hopefully. He seemed simply thrilled to have her there.

"I would love to spend some time here," Ren said. "I like the City. This is my only chance to go with Harry, though."

"Well at the very least I'm going to go shopping with you this morning, yes?" Laike insisted.

"Alright!" Ren agreed.

After breakfast they went out to the City and strolled through the marketplace and stores. Laike seemed determined to spoil his granddaughter rotten, and the two of them were all over the place. Ren looked pleased; Harry knew how she liked pretty clothes. While they were distracted he wandered the street. Finding someone viable to talk to, Harry walked up to him. It was a man with a huge stall and wide variety of goods, under a sign that said, 'Buy, Sell, or Trade'. The man seemed to be popular, with plenty of costumers, and Harry approached him in a lull of activity.

"Hello," Harry said, and the man saw him.

"How can I help ye today?" The man inquired, leaning over his table slightly.

Harry reached into his pocket, carefully pulling out a handful of feathers, and dumped them on the table. After a moment's thought, he picked one back up again and put it back in his pocket, for memory's sake. He didn't see why he needed all of them, though.

The man's eyebrows rose. "What have we got here?" He picked one up and tested the edge. "Silent feathers!" he exclaimed. "The sharp

kind!" He looked at Harry speculatively, and Harry thought the man was trying to gauge how well Harry knew their worth.

"I know what I deserve for these, so don't try any tricks," Harry said, even though he didn't.

"Now, I wouldn't do that, would I?" The man said, and Harry shrugged, looking at him pointedly. "Alright." He picked up the feathers, and grabbed a couple handfuls of currency out of a pouch he carried on his front, and piled them carefully in front of Harry. He went back to take two more handfuls, and added them to the pile. Harry tried not to register surprise, and picked up the coins, inspecting them. They had a sun motif. It was currency Harry had never seen before, but they were large and shiny. Harry dropped them into his pockets, which bulged. The man carefully picked up the feathers and put them in a velvet lined box, which he then put behind the counter. "For special request only," The man explained. "You probably wouldn't be revealing where you got them, would you." He didn't sound very expectant.

"Trade secret," Harry said simply.

Harry bought a few things of interest as souvenirs, basic clothing items with high quality fabric, and a couple books from a bookstore he lurked in for some time. They went back to Laike's house and Harry found himself to be bored, anxious to get moving, to do the next thing. Ren and Harry had agreed that they needed to talk to Dumbledore alone, first.

"Ren, why don't you change into one of your new outfits for lunch?" Alexander Laike suggested, walking toward the door. "I have something to arrange, I'll be back shortly."

"Yes Grandfather," Ren said with a wink.

"What are you winking for?" Harry asked.

"We talked it over while shopping," she explained. "And Grandfather insisted on going about this the 'proper' way. He says the best first

impression would be to invite Dumbledore and the others over for lunch. They're sure to be thrilled."

Harry looked at her blankly. "Dumbledore... coming here. Now."

"Well, in a little bit," she clarified. "Grandfather is going to go to Lord Marr, because they're Lord Marr's guests really, and then they'll ask the whole group to lunch. Which gives us enough time to do something about your hair... Grandfather's been too distracted by my presence, and it's a bit of a stretch to make a connection... but if your friends saw you in your actual form with your braids, and they're not used to seeing you with braids, maybe we should take them out?"

"Good point," Harry agreed.

She sat him down and started unraveling his hair and he awkwardly helped on the other side, until it was a mass of crimped locks.

"You'll want to wash that, it will straighten," She poked him. "You need a shower anyway."

Harry went back to his guestroom, used the shower in the adjoining bathroom and gave himself a good scrubbing. The shelves of the bathroom were stocked with all sorts of nice-smelling concoctions. Again, they were a little girly, but Harry found something suitable. When he was done he got dressed in his new clothes, combed his hair, and went looking for Ren. He waited for a while outside her room until she was ready to come out, and was very impressed.

She was dressed very City-like, with a long silky purple dress that fit snugly down to her knees before flaring out, and had billowy off the shoulder sleeves. Dark lace was pinned over her hair as well as some small flowers. Her hair was always slightly wavy with a bit of curl at the end, but she'd curled it a little more and there was some liner around her eyes that made them really stand out.

"You look beautiful," Harry said honestly. He felt a sense of pride. He could see her resemblance to Amanda, too.

"Don't sound so surprised," she replied airily. "Are you packed?"

He nodded.

"Me too," she said.

Harry was wearing his Bloodbeast claw over his shirt. It looked cool, and he could always say he bought it as a souvenir. The two cousins went to the top of the stairs, and listened down below. Laike was heading up toward them, and upon seeing them motioned for them to come down.

"Your friends have agreed to come to lunch," he said. "The cooks are busy as we speak, and the large dining room is being set. As requested, I will seat everyone and pull Dumbledore aside. Harry, you can wait until that time." He stopped, and looked Ren over. "You wear those clothes wonderfully. Expensive clothes only suit beautiful women."

Ren took that as a compliment, nodding, and she and Harry went to a sitting room with a view over the street. Lord Marr was coming up the walkway, followed by a small crowd of people, Dumbledore in the lead. Harry quickly tried pointing people out to her, Dumbledore of course, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, Ron, Hermione, all the important people, but they were up to the house before he could finish.

Ren got to her feet. "I get to play hostess," she said happily. "Did you see how everyone's been looking at me? Like I'm pretty."

"You are pretty, Ren." Harry told her.

"Yes I KNOW that," she said honestly, "But people are usually too distracted by... my handicap."

"Well hurry you have to make your entrance," Harry said, then sat back to wait. He could hear people entering the home, the voice of Lord Marr introducing everyone to Lord Laike and his granddaughter. After a moment's hesitation, Harry decided to take a tiny risk and move into hallway where he could keep the dining room door open a tiny crack so no one could see him, and watch. As he did so, their

guests filed into the dining room. Harry could see the way the students all looked at Ren, they were impressed. It was one of those moments where you look at someone your age, who may even look a little like you, but who's had such a completely different life experience than you that you don't know how to relate.

"I'd like to thank you, Lord Laike, on behalf of the Hogwarts students, staff, and myself, for your lunch invitation," Dumbledore announced, and Harry could see everyone looking excited. It wasn't every day you were invited to the home of one of the three City Lords.

Everyone milled around looking for seats, and Harry could see Ren was saving one for him next to herself. It seemed strange, because there was a lot for him to go through before he could sit in that chair. Ren craned her neck to find Hermione and Ron in the crowd, and then turned around as they walked by and stuck out her hand, seemingly introducing herself again. Harry couldn't hear what they were saying over the noise of everyone else, but they seemed to get along fine because Ron and Hermione sat down nearby. The meal started, and Harry found himself looking at the table hungrily, even though they were only at the salad course. As everyone was occupied, Lord Laike touched Dumbledore's shoulder lightly and murmured something. Dumbledore put his fork down.

Here it comes! Harry thought, semi-panicked. What's he going to say to me? What has he gone through since finding me missing?

Dumbledore got to his feet and followed Laike, and Ren went with them as well, heading right for Harry. Harry quickly decided this confrontation didn't need to happen in the hallway right next to the dining room, and backtracked down the hall to the sitting room, where he sat down and tried to take deep, relaxing breaths. Footsteps neared.

The door opened, and Dumbledore stepped inside.

Harry didn't say anything. Dumbledore took a sharp intake of breath as he stared at Harry in disbelief.

“Harry!!” He exclaimed.

“Hello, Headmaster,” Harry said calmly.

“... And there you are, sitting as if you haven’t just ruined the whole trip for the professors and myself!” Dumbledore was shaking with rage, and Harry was completely taken aback, not used to that particular emotion from his Headmaster. “You really did it, didn’t you? You ACTUALLY went through the portal on your own?!?”

Harry frowned. “Not on purpose, sir.”

“I found your broom and invisibility cloak LYING ON THE GROUND NEXT TO THE PORTAL!” Dumbledore’s fingers clenched over the front of his robes. He looked like he wanted to be shaking Harry. “Do you understand how terrifying that is? That I may have... LOST... one of my students, the Boy Who Lived?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry mumbled, barely able to look Dumbledore in the eyes.

“What a FOOLISH thing to do Harry!” Dumbledore enunciated.

“Professor, you told me I may have family over here,” Harry pointed out.

“Are you so impatient that you couldn’t wait a couple days?” Dumbledore sounded gravely disappointed. “To put yourself in such danger, Harry...”

There was a moment of silence, in which Harry noticed how stunned Laike and Ren were.

“Er, Dumbledore, this is my cousin Ren,” Harry said, trying to change the subject. Ren smiled graciously and sat down next to Harry. Dumbledore looked from Harry, to Ren, to Laike, and back again.

“Your cousin?” Dumbledore repeated, looking at Ren more closely.

"Do they know?" Harry asked, gesturing to the door. "What did you tell them about me?"

"The teachers I told the truth, of course," Dumbledore said. "I needed to in order for them to keep an eye out for you while here. I assure you they are equally as incensed as I am. As for the students, they are ignorant of your situation. I told them you were visiting relatives, ironically enough, as I was hoping would be the case. It's quite amazing that you found them, Harry." Harry smiled, thinking the same thing. "However, I was vague on the details."

"Mr. Dumbledore, Sir?" Ren asked boldly. She drew herself up straight, proud, and looked at him directly. "I would like to spend more time with Harry, and I'm anxious to see Earth. I was hoping that I could come along."

Dumbledore looked surprised. "Do you have wizarding ability, dear?" he inquired.

Ren looked slightly hesitant, unfamiliar with the term.

"Of course she does," Harry said. "She's definitely magical. She does magic differently, without a wand. I'm sure you'll find it really interesting."

Dumbledore looked at her speculatively. "I'm not making any promises. I'm going to confer with the other teachers, but I think we may be able to give it a chance."

"I would gladly pay for any tuition fees," Laike added.

Dumbledore turned. "Let's go back to lunch, lest they worry. I need to think about how I'm going to phrase this."

Dumbledore strode up to the doorway to the dining room and said in a loud voice, "Excuse me, but can I have everyone's attention for one moment?"

Harry knew it would come to this, but was horrified anyway. He again tried to take calming breaths. Ren took his hand in hers and smiled at him encouragingly.

"I've mentioned to all of you that Harry was visiting relatives, and unable be with us at the time. We've now joined him, however," Dumbledore said, and the room became dead silent. "Harry, will you take a seat with your cousin Ren and eat lunch with us?"

Harry and Ren stepped out into the room, falling under intense scrutiny. They took their seats, and Harry found himself right next to Ron, who was staring.

"Harry, your family comes from HERE?" Ron asked.

Hermione leaned forward over the table. "Wow Harry, that's amazing!" She at least, seemed thrilled. "You've been here with family all this time? I'm so happy for you."

Harry smiled back. Most of the students were drawn back by the lure of the food, but those who knew him better were still watching him closely, stunned by the revelation. "Yes, there are more of them but they couldn't be here. I'm definitely glad to have found them."

"You must have learned a lot about Origin!" she said.

Harry shrugged. "Probably not any more than you have. So what's the trip been like so far?" Harry noticed that one of the people looking at him still was Draco Malfoy, who gazed at him speculatively.

"First we had to stay at Hogwarts for a week and study about Origin," Ron complained.

I wonder if that was originally in the plan, or if they added that while they were trying to figure out what to do about me, Harry wondered. Maybe they sent someone ahead to try and locate me.

"We've been on Origin for a week and a half," Hermione continued for him, impatient. "We've traveled a bit, though never far from the City.

We have this great guide, Atac. We went camping, and we went boating and saw Mermaids. We met a group of Centaurs in the City, and saw some Bloodbeasts passing through, and Vineadryads."

"Bizarre people," Ron added.

"The Vineadryads?" Harry inquired.

"Bizarre looking, that is," Ron amended.

"I've never seen one," Harry said. "More bizarre than the Bloodbeasts?"

Ron nodded. "Bloodbeasts are kind of hairy and growly, but the Vineadryads are eerie."

"Kind of like... a cross between a Veela and a Mandrake," Hermione supplied.

Harry stared at her, dumbfounded. "Now that I've got to see," he said.

"We even saw Silents!" Hermione said excitedly.

"We saw them too," Harry said, and lifted his hand where it was still holding Ren's, to indicate who he meant. "They were special guests of Ren's Grandfather just as you were all special guests of Lord Marr."

"Did you see the Queen?" Ron asked, sounding awed, and Harry nodded.

"You know, Harry, you look different," Hermione said suddenly, as if it was just occurring to her. "You've changed over the summer."

Harry shrugged it off, though he knew he wasn't the same. "Longer hair, more height," he said casually, and they accepted it. Harry leaned back to actually begin and enjoy the meal, and let go of Ren's hand. They shared a smile. They had decided definitely not to mention to anyone that they were both half-Silent. It would have been awkward since Laike didn't know, but mainly it was because

Dumbledore might figure out Harry was Cursed, either by connecting him somehow to the Silents he'd encountered, or asking to see Harry's true form, which was likely. If Dumbledore knew Harry was Cursed, he would do the 'responsible' thing and remove Harry from Hogwarts for the safety of the students there. Harry was confident in the amulet that Madalena had made for him, and his place at Hogwarts was one of the most precious things he had.

## Chapter Seventeen: Duality

Harry stood nervously in the Portal Center, glancing at everyone around him. He knew he was being unnecessarily paranoid, but he was so close to freedom and fantasies were running through his head in which Silents swooped down on him to take him back to the Pit. Ren noticed his agitation, and poked him in the arm.

"Well, I'm excited." She announced to him, Ron and Hermione.

"I just realized something," Ron said to Harry. "We still have four days until school starts. You and Hermione both going to come stay at my house; Ren is going to have to come with us."

Ren looked crestfallen. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you," she apologized.

Ron shook his head. "No, my mum is going to be thrilled to meet you."

Harry thought over the events of his last day on Origin. The Hogwarts visitors were staying at a hotel near the Portal Center, renting two long rooms with long rows of beds, one for males and one for females. Ren had slept on the girls' side, and Hermione had taken care of her, introducing people. Hermione had immediately noticed how little Ren knew about Earth, and how receptive Ren was to hearing about the new world she would soon be traveling to, and chatted almost non-stop, even pulling out *Hogwarts: A History* at one point in order to read an excerpt aloud. Ren looked amused by her, but they got along fine. Ron was being a little more distant, thrown off by the fact that she was from a completely different planet.

The night before, Harry had sat down with Dumbledore and asked him about the affairs of the Wizarding World so that he would be caught up to speed. The one thing Harry could say about his adventure on Origin was that it had made a good distraction. Meeting his family had taken the edge off Harry's grief, but Harry still missed Sirius deeply. Things were looking slightly grim for the Wizarding World, and Rufus Scrimgeour had replaced Fudge as Minister of Magic. Harry had asked him about the new Defense Against the Dark

Arts Professor, and Dumbledore told him that he would take care of it later that week.

Ren had been perplexed by the idea of the ‘dark arts’. To her, dark didn’t equate with ‘bad’. She wondered why it wasn’t called ‘Defense against the Bad Arts’, or the ‘Evil Arts’.

The Porting Center was a large raised stone platform. Around the circular platform was a series of portals, with signs indicating which world they led to. Stairs wound around its base and up to the top for people to wait, while City Officials checked their papers to make sure they were traveling legally. Lord Laike had approved Ren’s trip to Earth for her. Harry was trying to pretend he’d been there before, since this was where the portal he went through was supposed to have brought him. Lucky the Hogwarts group had been registered under one set of papers, so he was never individually checked, and the lie that he’d been to the Portal Center before wasn’t exposed.

It was now Harry’s turn to step through the portal. He hoped he didn’t inadvertently redirect the portal again, and held his breath as he stepped through, trying not to show his anxiety.

He stepped through to the other side and immediately found himself standing on the grounds of Hogwarts, empty air behind him. He breathed a sigh of relief. Ron and Hermione were waiting for him on the other side, sitting near the edge of the lake.

Harry went to join them. He had been near the end of the line; soon everyone would be through the portal and they would take the Hogwarts Express and be picked up by their parents, get their school supplies, and return to Hogwarts. He sighed softly as he his gaze traveled over the Hogwarts grounds.

They passed the time on the train sharing experiences from Origin, although Ren and Harry’s versions skewed from the truth so the two of them decided to talk less and let Ron and Hermione do most of the talking. It made Harry uneasy lying to them. They’d always been truthful to each other, the three of them, and it was tearing him apart.

Our friendship is strong because we're loyal and honest with each other...Harry knew this. But there's also something special about the way they look at me. Out of everyone, they don't see The-Boy-Who-Lived or the Wild One, they see Harry.

... But do they really see Harry, now that there's more to me? Can they really know me anymore? If I want them to know me, shouldn't they know the truth? Harry gazed out the window, not seeing anything. That's true, he reasoned with himself, But there's also a certain line, a certain point to cross that will go too far. Ron already struggles with me being the Boy-Who-Lived and dealing with fame. If they knew this, they would see me as... a freak.

They have been such good friends, Harry thought woefully. One day I will tell them, he told himself. But I'm not ready for them to know... not yet. Harry wanted to shake his head clear and leave all the difficult thoughts behind in Origin, where they belonged, where they fit.

The disguise amulet was still there on his chest under his shirt, the enchantment that hid it seemed to have faded away as the knowledge of its existence rooted itself in his mind. It means it's not as effective any more. It still works, but the perfection of original spell is tarnished.

They pulled up to Platform Nine and Three Quarters, and Harry stood up to gather his belongings, and help Ren who'd accumulated quite a few more than she could handle at her grandfather's house. They would have to get her a trunk to fit it all in, the bag wasn't enough any more.

My name is Harry Potter. I am on Earth. I am half human, I have heritage here. The amulet will protect me. I can just let go of it all, and focus on the here and now. I have a cousin, two very good friends, and the last couple days of summer to enjoy.

Harry wasn't quite convinced, but he was going to do his best and give it a try.

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley called as they stepped off the Hogwarts Express.

"See you soon," Ron said in the direction of the train, and seeing Hermione raise an eyebrow at him turned red and hurried off. "Mum!"

"Hermione and Harry, how nice it is to see you, my dears. I'm just thrilled to have you stay with us! Come along, we need to get out of this mess," she said, pushing through people.

"Hold on, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said as soon as they reached an emptier spot. Ren was standing at his elbow, looking worried. "There's someone here you've yet to meet."

Mrs. Weasley caught sight of Ren, and looked her over, taking in Ren's concerned expression and the way she stuck right next to Harry. "Now, who's this?"

"We can explain better later," Harry promised, "This is my cousin Ren, and she came to visit me. Problem is I'm already visiting you..."

"A cousin?" Mrs. Weasley asked, understandably surprised. "Of course! Harry's like family, you're welcome Ren. As long as you don't mind sharing a room..." she thought intently. "Well, I suppose you'll have to fit in with Hermione and Ginny, we can manage to fit another mattress in there."

"I don't mind at all," Ren said, appreciative.

Later that day, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Ren were sitting in a row in the Weasley backyard, gazing down at the forest ahead of them.

Ginny was watching Ren speculatively, everyone else had grown used to her presence by now but Ginny and Ren had only just been introduced.

"Thanks for sharing your room with me," Ren said, handling the staring well.

"You're Harry's cousin?" Ginny repeated, for about the fifth time.

"Hey Harry," Ren said, choosing to let Ginny dwell on it on her own.  
"This isn't that different from home. It's like the Divide."

Harry nodded.

"I still can't believe I wasn't invited," Ginny sighed, throwing her hands up in the air. "I never get to go anywhere!"

"Believe me," Ren said. "I know the feeling."

"Do you?" Ginny asked.

Ren laughed. "Oh yes, I have two older brothers. Back home I never get to go anywhere by myself, someone always goes everywhere with me."

"Then how come they let you come to Earth?" Ginny asked.

"... Because Harry is with me," Ren replied, as if that were obvious.  
"He'll keep me safe."

Ginny giggled. "He probably will." She turned to everyone. "Did you all meet Phlegm, too?"

"Phlegm?" Hermione asked, laughing. "Fleur? Yes we got quite the enthusiastic greeting."

"She's insufferable... well at least we can finally go to Diagon Alley!"  
Ginny said, "I've been itching to get out of here for days."

Did she have to say 'itching'? Harry wondered despairingly. It makes my back itch when somebody says 'itching'.

"Yes, we found our Hogwarts letters and O.W.L. results when we got home," he told her. "Ron and Hermione are prefects," he added, not sure how he felt about that.

"Well... Mum says we're going later today," Ron announced. "Only after a game of Quidditch, I say."

"HOLD IT," Ren demanded. "I haven't got a clue what you all are talking about! Diagonally? Kidditch?" She shook her head. "This is hopeless."

"No it's not, you just need to do some reading," Harry said. "I've got the Book of Earth. Read it, you can learn a lot from that book."

"And you've got Hermione," Ron added. "Which is basically like having your own library."

Everyone chuckled.

"Well I'll take that book, thank you," Ren told Harry, who went into the house to get it.

Upon returning, he saw Ron and Ginny had gotten brooms and were sorting out a game of Quidditch.

"You can play," Ren said, looking at the brooms skeptically. "I'll read."

Harry handed her the Book of Earth, and at the same moment Ginny kicked off the ground on her broom.

"WHOA!" Ren got to her feet, and dropped the book in the dirt, staring up at Ginny.

"Hey!" Harry protested. "Gray gave that to me! Be nice to it."

"You sound like Hermione, defending a book like that." Ron noted.

"It has sentimental value," Harry retorted. "Yes, Ren, we fly."

"On brooms!"

"Do you want to try it?" Harry asked, picking up his broom and offering it to her.

"No." She said resolutely, picking up the Book of Earth and dusting it off.

"Are you sure? It's lots of fun, and not that hard to learn," Ron offered.  
"I can teach you."

Ren turned her back on them, walking a couple feet away to find a nice spot to lean against the house and read. "I'm just not made for flying," she murmured, and disappeared behind her book.

Ron looked at Harry, who shrugged.

Ren didn't move throughout the whole game, but Harry swore she was watching, peeking over her book.

They had lunch, and then it was time to go to Diagon Alley. They traveled by floo powder.

"You know," Ren told Ginny as they walked through the entrance. "Where I come from, everyone knows about magic."

"Everyone?" Ginny repeated.

"Even all the non-magical people," Ren confirmed. "We don't have a word for them like you do. They're just 'regular people.'"

"Muggles," Ginny supplied. "So what are wizards called then?"

"Mages," Ren said.

"Come on, Ren," Harry called. "I'm going to take you to Ollivanders to get you a wand."

Ren wrinkled her nose as she caught up to him. "What do I need a wand for? I've got my casting stone, which is a lot better, don't you think?" They waved to the others, and walked in the direction of Ollivanders.

"If you're going to go to Hogwarts, you need a wand," Harry said firmly.

Ren sighed. "If you say so."

Ollivanders was sorting boxes when they entered the store to the clinking of the bell, and he finished before looking up to see who it was. "Harry Potter! We meet again. How can I help you? I don't believe I've met this young lady."

Harry didn't particularly feel like going in Ren's story, so he kept it simple, "Ren needs a wand."

"Yes, of course." Ollivander bustled around. The tape measure did some short measurements of Ren, and Harry noticed as it did so numbers were writing themselves onto a piece of parchment that lay on the counter. Ollivander grabbed the parchment and scanned it quickly, then glanced around the room in thought. "Hmm," he said vaguely.

"Hmm?" Ren whispered to Harry. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Shh," Harry said.

Ollivander walked away down an aisle, a ladder following him. He climbed the ladder and selected a couple boxes, came back to dump them on the counter then went back for more, further in the store. Finally there was a goodly stack to try and he opened the first one.

"Just pick it up and swish it through the air," Harry told Ren.

Looking at the wand skeptically, Ren picked it up and 'tried it out'. One dismal spark fell out of the end and drifted dejectedly to the ground like a dust mote.

"No," Ollivander confirmed, taking it away and giving her another one. It had about the same success as the first one.

About twenty boxes later, Ollivander was looking exasperated. He had to go get another armful, and none of the wands reacted very much at all to Ren. Ren was looking confused.

"What's supposed to happen?" She asked. A cloud of sparkling dust motes floated in the air around her.

"Um... more than that," Harry told her. Maybe the wands know she doesn't need one?

The next one Ollivander gave her made three dejected little sparks, instead of one. He stopped and put his head in his heads. "I don't think it's going to get any better than that," he said finally. "I apologize young lady, but those were all the best prospects for you, and simply none of them was 'the one'. I think, unfortunately, the wand for you just isn't in my store."

Harry wasn't particularly surprised.

"Will you oblige me and refrain from telling everyone?" Ollivander requested. "It would ruin my reputation. This has never happened before. Take this one, I'll discount it."

"It'll do?" Ren asked him, and Ollivander nodded. "Alright," she said, digging money out of her pockets. Harry took it and paid for her, since she wasn't used to the Wizard money yet.

As they stepped from Ollivander's shop, Ren looked at her wand doubtfully and tucked it away.

"They work differently than casting stones, but they're just as good," Harry told her, and she shrugged.

"Are you okay, Harry?" She asked. "If you don't mind me saying so, you seem... out of it."

Harry shrugged. "It's just so... weird. I just went through the craziest experience of my life, literally a whirlwind adventure, and here I am back to my normal life like nothing happened. It's such a contrast. One minute I'm scared I'll never see Ron, Hermione, or the Weasleys again, and now I'm sitting down to dinner with them." He pulled his claw out from under his shirt, running his thumb over its smooth surface.

"Think about how I feel," Ren countered. "All this... sunlight, how can you stand it? My eyes are always stinging. I've barely ever left the Pit in my whole life, besides the occasional family trip to the Divide. I've

never away from my family before, now I don't even know when I'll see them again."

"That's true, you're handling everything well," Harry complemented her. "It must be hard."

She shrugged. "I knew it would be, I accepted that when I left."

"I feel so different," he explained further. "Like I've got this second side to me that nobody knows about. I'm not the same Harry, and they've noticed, I see them looking at me sometimes like they're trying to figure me out. That's why I can't tell them, I don't want to see how they'd react to the truth. They would be afraid of me."

"I understand," Ren said, nodding.

"It's only been weeks since I was on Earth, but in that short amount of time so much is changed. I almost don't even know who I am anymore," Harry said sadly.

"You're Harry," Ren said. "From Earth. You have friends at Hogwarts, family in Origin, and you have the ability to fly. You sound like a pretty neat person to me." She gave him a hug. "You'll figure it out, I promise."

Harry hugged her back. "Yeah. At least we have each other."

Author Note: You've all read the sixth book, I presume, and I'm not going to mangle it by rewriting parts of it. I'll mention events as they happen that are important, as well as anything that's changed in this AU. This story is about Harry the Silent, not Harry the Human.

## Chapter Eighteen: Revelation

"Let's go," Harry said, as they were about to board the Hogwarts Express.

"Um, Harry," Hermione said delicately. "Ron and I have to go to the Prefect's carriage and then patrol the corridors."

"Oh," Harry said, having forgotten. "Right." Ron and Hermione walked off, leaving Harry and Ren to find a compartment on their own. Two days earlier, Dumbledore had picked up Harry and brought him to meet Horace Slughorn, and they had managed to convince Slughorn to come back as a professor. Harry thought he was odd, and wasn't sure what to make of him. 'Just wait until you meet him, and you'll see what I mean,' he had told the others.

Ren was tapping her feet on the floor, half out of excitement, half anxiety. She'd gotten used to the Weasley home, she liked it there. Mrs. Weasley had somehow sensed Ren's unease at being in their world and had taken to mothering her almost as much as Harry. It had done Ren good and she had relaxed considerably, although she still refused to join their games of Quidditch. She watched more openly now, with obvious interest.

A knock on the door and a third year girl stepped in. "Here's a letter for Harry Potter," she said, thrusting it at him. "From Professor Slughorn."

Curious, Harry opened it to find an invitation for lunch. "Huh," Harry murmured. "I wonder what that's all about. I can't very well leave you here alone, though."

Ren smiled gratefully, and nearly pressed her nose up against the glass trying to watch the landscape go by. Her long braid bobbed as she tried to see everything. "This is making me dizzy," she said, laughing slightly.

"You're going to like Hogwarts," Harry told her.

"I've heard so much about it from all of you," she said, "It's going to be a real letdown if it isn't the most wonderful place on Earth like you all make it sound."

Harry shrugged. "It's my home here."

The compartment door slammed open. Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway, arms crossed, with a look in his eye of irritated disgust.

"... Whoa, what bit you in the ass?" Ren asked, stunned.

Draco, who had been directing this look at Harry, turned it on her. "I suppose you two think you're special, coming from another world."

Harry took a deep breath, turning away and trying to ignore him. Don't rip his head off, don't rip his head off...

"Actually, yes," Ren said brightly. "I'm rather proud of my heritage."

"You're both just freaks," Draco said snidely, displeased that Ren seemed to have taken his insult as a compliment.

Ren looked at him like he'd just punched himself in the face, bewildered. "... What's wrong with you?" She demanded. "Are you alright in the head?"

Draco frowned. Trying to regain the upper hand, he turned back to Harry. "Well? Can't think of anything to say, Potter?"

"Aren't you supposed to be doing Prefect things?" Harry asked, trying not to let Draco rile him up. His disguise amulet was feeling heavy and slightly warm, it was probably working hard.

Draco opened his mouth to say something, but then stopped, looking down at his chest. It looked like he was being pushed backward slowly but firmly. Harry looked at Ren to see her eyes squinted with effort. Draco tried to resist, looking at their hands trying to see which one was holding a wand. They looked at him serenely, hands empty on their laps. With a grunt Draco finally stepped away from the pressure and left, slamming the compartment door behind him.

"Ignore him," Harry said.

Ren looked confused, more than hurt. "Don't worry about me," she replied. "There are enough people at home like that; I don't let it get to me anymore."

A couple hours later, after Ron and Hermione had joined them, Harry was leading Ren off the train and to the carriages when he found his way impeded by the immense bulk of Horace Slughorn.

"There you are Harry!" Slughorn said, clasping Harry's shoulder. "I was hoping to see you at my lunch today. Did you not get my invitation?"

Harry shook his head. "No I got it. Thanks for the invitation, but I was sitting with my cousin. She's going to Hogwarts for the first time and I couldn't leave her behind."

Professor Slughorn looked Ren over carefully. "How old are you, girl?"

"Fifteen," Ren answered.

Professor Slughorn's busy eyebrows almost lifted off of his head itself. "You're first time to Hogwarts? How might that be?" he asked curiously.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said, trying to guide Ren away from the professor. He didn't like the speculative look in Slughorn's eyes; he looked fascinated, much too interested in this mystery. Harry wasn't supposed to broadcast the fact that Ren wasn't enrolled.

Professor Slughorn watched them go with that same expression on his face. He clearly wasn't the kind of man who liked secrets being kept from him.

Harry eyed the thestrals as they got into the carriages, watching them snort and eye the students. He thought of Sirius sadly, Death never leaves me alone.

Ren had been to Hogwarts before the few days earlier of course, but she'd never been inside, so she started forward eagerly toward the castle after the carriage ride, and the others followed only to find themselves stopped by yet another teacher.

"Harry Potter," Minerva McGonagall said, and they stopped, Ron and Hermione almost bumping into them from behind.

"Yes Professor?" Harry asked, slightly nervous. What now?

"You and..." Professor McGonagall looked down at a sheaf of papers in her hands. "Ren Raschadin are requested to visit the Headmaster's office after the feast."

"Alright Professor," they both said, and she let them go.

"I wonder what that's all about?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. We'll find out."

"Wow," Ren said as she stepped into the Great Hall. Her eyes roamed over the long tables, the students, the floating candles and finally up to the sky.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shared matching satisfied smiles.

"DARK!" she exclaimed, head tilted back as far as it would go.

"... well it is almost dark outside, yes," Hermione said, looking slightly puzzled.

"No, dark," Ren repeated. "It means awesome." Ron and Hermione didn't get it, and shrugged at each other.

"Is Ren getting sorted?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't think so, she's not enrolled, right? Maybe we'll find out at the meeting."

"That's probably what it's about," Hermione agreed as they took their seats.

The sorting commenced, and then Dumbledore announced Horace Slughorn would be the new potions professor and Professor Snape would be taking over Defense Against the Dark Arts, which they all groaned about. They'd been hoping to be done with Professor Snape. At the Gryffindor table, Ren blended in with the others, although her robes were simple robes without any Gryffindor embellishments. Those who had been on their summer trip just glanced at her knowingly. The feast was delicious enough to be distracting, and Harry almost followed the others on their way to Gryffindor tower before remembering they had somewhere to be.

"Headmaster's office!" Harry said aloud. "Right!" He grabbed Ren's hand and pulled her through the halls in the other direction, taking long strides. She kept slowing down to stare at the portraits and the armor that lined the halls, but he pulled her onward.

The door to the Headmaster's office was open, and Professor McGonagall was standing in the doorway. Seeing them, she stepped aside, and they went up the twisting staircase together. Harry's stomach did a little flip. Ren didn't seem to know she was supposed to be nervous. At the top of the stairway they looked into Dumbledore's office, where Dumbledore was seated behind his desk. Across from him were two empty chairs. To Harry's surprise, Professors Snape, Flitwick, and Sprout stood behind Dumbledore, and the door closed behind them as Professor McGonagall moved across the room to stand with the others.

Slowly, Harry and Ren went to take their seats, intimidated by all the eyes looking at them appraisingly.

"So, Harry," Dumbledore started.

"If I may?" Professor McGonagall asked stiffly, gesturing to the two students.

"Yes?" Dumbledore responded questioningly.

"Harry Potter, will you tell me what in Merlin's name you were thinking with that dangerous stunt this summer?" She demanded. "You had the professors all frantically searching for you, you could have ended up anywhere when you stepped into that portal, do you not value your life?"

Harry sighed. "It was an accident," he mumbled. "I just wanted to look."

"He probably did it for the attention," Professor Snape announced. "Once again disregarding what everyone else must go through to deal with his antics."

"That's unnecessary, Severus," Dumbledore told him, not turning from Harry and Ren.

Professors Flitwick and Sprout just shook their heads, disappointed in Harry as well, and Harry wanted to sink into the floor. Ren nudged him encouragingly.

"Now to business," Dumbledore continued. "Please state your name," he said to Ren.

"Ren Raschadin," she replied.

"Age?"

"Fifteen."

"You are the granddaughter of Lord Alexander Laike?"

"Yes," she affirmed.

"Please state your parents names," Dumbledore asked, writing all of this information down.

"Amanda and Lexian Raschadin." Ren nodded at Harry. "Harry's father was my father's older brother. They were very close," she added.

Dumbledore nodded, noting this as well. “Did you purchase a wand? I understand magic is done differently on Origin.”

“I bought one but I don’t know how to use it yet,” Ren told him.

“But she has wizarding ability?” McGonagall asked Dumbledore, who nodded.

“It would appear so.” Dumbledore put down his quill. “If Ren had been enrolled in Hogwarts, she would have been a year beneath you, Harry, a fifth year along with Ginny Weasley. However since she’s not enrolled and is a visiting student, she will be attending your classes with you. Please focus on your schoolwork; however she can participate in the classes with your help. Perhaps some extra tutoring is in order. She can’t catch up at this point, but she will need some basics. She will not be sorted, but an extra bed has been added in the female dormitory of Gryffindor Tower. I understand you’ve met Ginny Weasley, Ren; you will be in a room with her. Any questions?”

They shook their heads.

“Thank you very much for this opportunity, Headmaster,” Ren said politely. “I really appreciate it.”

“Very well,” Professor Dumbledore said. “We do have one thing to ask in return, however.”

“Yes?” Ren inquired.

“There weren’t very many wizards in the City, unfortunately, which was a bit of a disappointment for us,” Dumbledore explained. “These professors and I were hoping to see a demonstration of how your magic is done, without a wand.”

Ren smiled, confidently. “Yes of course.” She reached into her robes and pulled out her casting stone, and the dim light in the room shone through it, lighting it up beautifully. “This is called a casting stone.” She looked to Harry, saying, “Harry was one too.”

Harry pulled his out as well, holding it up for them to see. The professors nodded, appreciating how finely crafted they were.

"You use wands, we use casting stones," Ren continued. "It has to touch your skin for you to use it. It serves as kind of a focus... using magic without one is usually unpredictable and not very strong, but with a casting stone... you just make things happen, I suppose." On the table, the papers floated up in to the air and hovered for a couple seconds. She opened her mouth, but looked at a loss all of a sudden. "Well, I don't really know how wands work, so how do I explain it?"

"I can probably explain," Harry said, and everyone looked at him. "I've been practicing," he explained, as they looked considerably less enthusiastic as when Ren had been explaining it, they probably didn't think he could be very skilled yet. "It's interesting how it actually does work very differently than wands," he told them. "With a wand spells are word activated. The downside of using a wand is that you have to announce your spell, and you have to be holding your wand in your hand and pointing it. It's considerably easier to lose your wand or have it taken from you, unlike a casting stone where it's secure around your neck." Everyone nodded agreement. "Another thing about using spells with a wand is you have to know the exact word to use, for the spell to work at all. You can't simply improvise spells."

"You cant?!" Ren asked. "That sounds hard."

"No, you can't," he confirmed. "The upside to using worded spells is that you can just learn a new word and a motion and voila, you've done a spell. You don't even need to know what the spell does in order to do it! That's what's harder with casting stones, you are in complete control of the spell so everything it does, you need to focus on it and think through it yourself. If you want the kind of originality and variety that you get from wand spells, you have to be really creative. The spell books for casting stones are a lot less specific than the ones used at Hogwarts, they're more or less filled with suggestions of spells and how you might go about casting one, although everyone thinks differently so it works differently for everyone."

"You've been studying Madalena's book," Ren commented, impressed.

"So casting stone spells are more instinctive to use, and if you're good enough you can improvise spells as necessary," Harry said in conclusion. "I've had time on my hands," he murmured to Ren, referring to the time he'd spent in the Keep.

"Fascinating," Professor Flitwick said, peering at the casting stones closely. "Very fascinating."

"Indeed," Snape said, trying not to look too interested but failing miserably.

McGonagall was looking at Harry, surprised by his knowledge, shaking her head slightly. "You never cease to surprise, Harry Potter. Now, these students need to get to bed if they're going to start classes tomorrow."

Harry and Ren got to their feet and exited the room, looking over his shoulder Harry saw the professors pull up chairs; he supposed they had 'beginning of term' business to talk about. He noticed Professor Slughorn wasn't there, he didn't seem to have been immediately accepted as 'one of them' by the entire faculty.

The door at the bottom of the stairway closed behind them, and they started out in the direction they came from. They came to a 'T' intersection in the hall, and Harry instinctively turned to start down the one in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, but came to an abrupt stop as Ren turned the other way, walking confidently along.

"Um, Ren," Harry said, hurrying to catch up. "This isn't the way to the dormitories," he pointed out.

"Yes, I know." She responded.

"Then, where are you going?" He asked.

"Exploring," she said nonchalantly.

"You can't do that," Harry protested. "We're supposed to go to our dormitories at this time, we can go exploring tomorrow."

Ren looked at him incredulously. "Do you always do as you're told?"

"Actually...no," Harry realized.

"Then what's the problem?" She didn't hesitate, walking in a new direction.

"We might get caught?" Harry suggested, "It wouldn't be a good start for us to be caught wandering after curfew on the first night. I thought you were 'oh so grateful' to be here?"

"I am," she said. "But I'm not really 'here', until I've explored."

Harry sighed. She's used to getting her own way, I see.

"Which way is out?" She inquired, gesturing about vaguely.

"Out?" Harry asked. "As in, outside, the grounds?"

"No, I mean out of my mind," she said sarcastically. "Come on Harry."

"That way," He pointed, now leading the way a little. Instead of taking the big door in the Great Hall, which Harry worried might be under surveillance somehow, he took the side entrance that opened to the greenhouses. Ren walked right past the greenhouses, bee-lining for the lake. They walked around the edge of the lake, straight toward the Forbidden Forest.

"That's the Forbidden Forest," Harry explained, pointing. Get the hint, Ren?

"Why is it forbidden?" Ren asked, walking faster. "Dark," she mumbled, looking more interested in it now that she knew it was forbidden.

Harry sighed again. "Because it's generally dangerous for students."

"Like we have anything to be afraid of," Ren said scornfully, gesturing to her casting stone. Harry followed her into the trees.

What is going on with her? Harry wondered. She's strong-willed, but she's acting a little over the top, in my opinion.

Once into the trees, Ren came to a stop, turning away from him.

"Ren?" Harry asked.

Abruptly she sat down, at the foot of a big tree, hiding her face.

Harry sat down next to her, concerned. "Ren, are you okay?"

She took her hands away, shaking her head. Harry saw her face was streaked with tears.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, putting an arm over her shoulders. "I thought we were in this together, Ren. What is it?"

She shrugged, raising her hands in a shrugging gesture helplessly. "I thought I would feel better in the forest, but it's just making me more homesick. Hogwarts is wonderful, but it's just not home."

Harry pulled her into a hug.

"You better not tell anyone I cried," she whispered fiercely.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he told her. "I understand completely. How do you think I felt in the Pit?"

Ren nodded.

Harry looked at her speculatively. "... Do you want to go home?"

Ren's shoulders slumped. "No, I should give Hogwarts a try. I've only been here a couple hours. There isn't any way to get home, anyway."

"Yeah, there is," Harry pointed out, "Me."

"You've never made a portal before," she protested, wiping her face with the edge of her sleeve.

"Aadon says it isn't difficult." Ren looked at him curiously, and Harry added, "Aadon is someone I met in the Pit. He's twenty-six thousand years old, so he knows a lot."

Ren's eyes widened, impressed.

They sat silently for a moment, Harry biting his lip thoughtfully. "I'm going to learn how to make a portal, right now," He decided. "That way if you want to go home, you know you can."

Ren looked concerned. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Shh," Harry quieted her. "It will make you feel better."

Harry got to his feet. What can go wrong? He wondered. Well, I could end up somewhere completely different, I could get stuck, I could get lost... Harry ignored those thoughts. Porting wasn't hard, right? I learned that right away. Making real portals can't be much harder.

He took his robes and shirt off first, then the disguise amulet from around his neck, handing it to Ren. She looked conflicted—worried if this was the right thing to do, but relieved and anxious to see if he could do it. As his wings returned to him and he gave them a nice stretch, he realized how confined he'd been feeling. "I've been wanting to do that anyway," he admitted.

Alright... alright... concentrating on where you want to go gets you there, getting to the Void requires concentrating on nothing, or the sky. Looking up, Harry focused on the sky through the branches of the trees, trying to fill his mind with the feeling of what it would be like to be surrounded with nothingness.

Keeping that image in mind, he closed his eyes. His skin crawled and he suddenly felt displaced, which was odd because porting normally didn't feel like anything.

All of a sudden... the air froze. Harry's eyes snapped open, seeing nothing but blank space surrounding him. He didn't rejoice, however, because the Void was much too intense to be thinking much at all.

The air was a frozen mass of icy daggers that dug into his skin; he was flapping with difficulty against a wind like a hurricane, whipping him through the air. There was no oxygen, breathing in earned him nothing, so he stopped trying, but found he could handle it.

Every moment was a struggle, as Harry tried to regain control of his flight. Frantically fighting the wind, he looked around, wondering what to do next. He could port back to Ren's side, but that wouldn't help him as he still didn't know how to actually make a portal. Finally he caught sight of something flickering in the air ahead, and made his way over to take a look at it.

It looked like an illusion, just an imprint of colors and shapes in the air. He could see right through them. Squinting, he realized it was a large sphere of a planet, but it was only an image. After flying around it from all sides, he started looking for more planets, and found them. They all looked different, some were icy, some covered in deserts, and they came in all kinds of strange colors and varied sizes.

Where's Earth? He wondered, turning around. To his surprise, he found himself looking at a long sparkly thread stretched behind him, tethering him to a planet in the distance. He touched it, numb fingers feeling nothing at all, but the flickering light of the thread responded, bending under the pressure.

Well, I found Earth, he thought, looking to the distant planet. Turning away, he set out to find Origin. Figuring it would be somewhere in the middle, he went in a small circle before coming across a huge planet that resembled Earth. Thinking this was a good bet, he swooped in closer to take a look. Making his way around the planet, he found a large dark spot on its surface, which on inspection looked to him like a miniature representation of the Pit.

That's it, he thought with relief. Now I'll bet if I ported onto another one of the planets, the thread would make a connection between them and open a Portal. I wonder if I could open a Portal into the

Pit... well it's certainly too risky to try, I've already proved I can get in, but what if I can't get out again? Bad idea... Another idea occurred to him. But if I DIDN'T want to make a Portal... He reached for the blue thread. It turned translucent near its end, disappearing into his chest. Grasping ahold of it, he tugged, and it came loose with a jerk.

Satisfied that he'd done what he'd come to do, he followed the thread back, holding the severed end in a fist. It shortened, staying taut.

So this is the Void... he thought with wonder, awed. It all makes sense now... It isn't all pointless, after all. He'd often thought of his resiliency to cold as a 'shell', keeping him warm on the inside and leaving cold a distant sensation. He now appreciated that protection, as the piercing cold went only skin deep. His oversized wings cooperated as he navigated through the Void; he imagined if they were any smaller he would have been swept away like a rag. All the fight and rage that I have inside, I need it. Every single bit of it is needed to fight the Void.

Back at the pale shadow of Earth, he followed the thread to its other end. Reaching out, he touched the planet with one finger lightly, right where he was tethered.

A moment later he was standing in the Forbidden Forest, gasping for breath.

"HARRY!" Ren rushed up to him, then stepped back. "Dark Eyes!" she swore, "You were gone so long, I was getting worried."

Harry nodded, taking in deep lungfuls of oxygen.

"Harry..." Ren pointed. "You're covered in ice."

Harry looked down at himself, his stiff pants, and then over his shoulders at his wings, which were covered in a layer of frost. He swept himself off a little bit, shaking off bits of ice. He could feel himself beginning to thaw, and rubbed his face to warm it a bit.

Ren looked terrified. "I never should have let you do that," she scolded herself.

Harry shook his head. "No, I can do it now. I figured out how to port. If you ever want to get back to Origin, I'll port you back outside the City or something."

"What was it like?" She asked, curious now.

"Amazing!" Harry said exuberantly.

"... Are you sure?" She asked, looking him over. "Doesn't look like fun to me."

"Ren," Harry looked at her, very seriously. "I learned something in there. They're all wrong. It's not a curse. It never was meant to be one, it's just an ability. Everything fits... everything about the way I am that was so wrong, I understand why it's necessary." Harry felt confident, powerful. "I'm exactly as I'm meant to be."

Ren's eyes were wide. "I believe it." She handed him the disguise amulet, and he reluctantly put it back on, then after his wings dwindled away his shirt and robes.

Harry felt like he was floating on air as they emerged from the treeline. I'm going to take the title 'Cursed', and I'm going to OWN it. They can't keep me down. I know the truth.

With a newfound sense of self, Harry returned to Hogwarts.

## Chapter Nineteen: The Secret Grotto

"Huh," Hermione said wonderingly, confused. Hermione sounding inarticulate and bewildered struck Harry as being extremely odd. He looked up from where he was trying to bring a figurine of a little bird into an illusion of life, and had been struggling with the spell. Leaning back, he turned to watch Hermione and Ren. Hermione, always being ahead, had taken over the tutoring of Ren in the classes she had with Harry. Ren held her wand over her own little figurine of a porcelain toad, saying the spell.

"No, no, no," Hermione said, looking for all the world like she wanted to take the wand out of Ren's hand and do it herself. The toad, still pasty looking, had hopped over and was looking over the edge of the table like he was about to attempt escape. Or suicide.

Hermione shook her head. "But you're doing it all wrong!"

"It worked, didn't it?" Ren asked, pointing to her toad.

"Yes, but..."

Harry turned back to his little bird, saying the spell a couple more times until it cheeped at him, before turning to the girls. "It's okay Hermione I can take over now," he said and Hermione went to help Ron, who was still struggling.

Harry leaned over to whisper to Ren. "You're cheating," he accused.

"Am not!" she insisted. "You're just jealous that I did it faster than you."

Harry gave her a piercing I-see-right-through-you gaze. "You're using your casting stone, you're not even saying the spell right."

"So?" Ren asked, changing tactics. "It's the same thing, right?"

Harry gave up.

Class ended for the day, and they went to go outside for a bit before it got dark. Ren hurried off to find Ginny. Harry sat down with his friends,

watching her go. A week into classes and she was doing a lot better, making friends and probably even learning something from Hermione (although Harry couldn't be sure).

Harry was in a good mood when he went to bed that night, asleep when his head hid the pillow.

He was fast asleep when something jumped on him, waking him up with a jolt. He had a terrifying flashback of the ice lizard attacking him in the middle of the night, and tried to sit up despite the weight on his chest. A hand clasped tightly over his mouth, trying to keep him quiet. An ice lizard wouldn't do that, he thought, looking up to see who was sitting on him.

Ren leaned forward over him, face coming into focus. Harry frowned, and she put a finger to her lips. "Shhh," she said quietly, and Harry nodded. She took her hand away.

"Ren, what are you doing in here?" he whispered furiously. "Don't jump on me when I'm sleeping like that, I could hurt you."

She flapped her hands anxiously. "It's an emergency," she told him. Grabbing Harry's hand, she brought it close to her and clasped it around her casting stone. It thrummed with a repeated vibration, and was flashing a pale gray glow.

"What does that mean?" He asked, not understanding.

"It's something Gray and I worked out when we were little," she explained. "It means he needs help."

Harry pushed her off, and grabbed a pair of pants and closed the bed curtains so they were obscured from prying eyes. He changed quickly.

"Are you going to port to him?" Ren asked.

Harry nodded. "It will go a lot faster if I cross the Void myself than if I open a Portal. You'll have to stay here."

"But what if you don't' come back?" Ren asked, panicked. "I'll have to cover for you, what do I say?"

"You'll figure something out," Harry told her, in too much of a rush to think on it.

"Just make sure my brother is okay," she pleaded, and Harry tied the magically impenetrable pouch to his belt and placed the disguise amulet in it. Then he disappeared from Hogwarts.

The Void leapt up and bashed him in the face, and he spun, trying to orient himself. Locating Origin he ripped his blue tether away and let it go, where it promptly faded away, before plunging right into the shape of the planet, trying to picture Gray's face as well as he could.

To his surprise it actually worked, and he found himself standing next to Gray, who held his own casting stone in his hand, no doubt activating the link to Ren.

Seeing Harry, his shoulders sagged with relief. "Thank Dark Eyes, Ren is a smart girl," he said. "There!" he pointed beyond Harry.

Harry looked around the scene. He was standing on an unfamiliar hilltop, it was dusk. Jon, Vosenn and Sariah were there, and Harry felt a prickle of fear that was washed away immediately when he saw the ice lizard attacking them. It was giving Jon a good mauling, who was bleeding from slash wounds. Harry winced. Beyond the ice lizard Enna kneeled on the ground, looking faint and rather wet, blond hair plastered to the sides of her face. As Harry watched the ice lizard delicately picked up the princess, not hurting her, and backed up from the others swishing his tail threateningly on the ground. Vosenn threw something at it that burst and spilled liquid all over its feet, and it howled, stumbling away.

"Put her down!" Sariah insisted shrilly. They were all looking desperate.

In the blink of an eye, Harry appeared on the scene, sweeping up between Jon and Sariah, right up to the ice lizard before it knew what happened. He grabbed one of its wrists, crushing the bones. "You

heard her," he said through gritted teeth. "Put... her... down." With each word he squeezed harder, and the clawed feet loosened their hold. Harry took Enna out of its arms. Transferred to Harry, Enna tightened her arms around his neck resolutely. With his other arm Harry smacked the ice lizard in the head, and it reeled back, and then decided to make a run for it. Harry considered chasing it down, but he had more important matters to attend to.

"Are you okay?" He asked Enna, and she nodded, pale.

"Harry!" Jon gasped. "You... came back." The three of them looked shocked. Gray came up from behind to stand with them; Harry doubted they noticed what he'd been doing.

Harry tried to dislodge Enna from around his neck, but she didn't let go. The shock seemed to be wearing off for his Hand; he took a step back.

Sariah looked saddened. "We're not going to hurt you, Harry."

Vosenn's face was turning red. "You!"

Harry took another step back. He didn't expect violence from Sariah, but Vosenn was another story.

"How could you do that to us?!" Vosenn finally articulated.

That's when Harry had enough. "It was never about you," he said angrily. "I'm going to go now," he told Enna quietly. "You need to let go."

"I want to come with you," she said in a little voice. "What if it comes back?"

Harry sighed. "Alright. But just for now."

In the blink of an eye, they were gone.

Knowing the Pit was a bad option, Harry ported them to the only other place he'd really been to on Origin: just outside the City.

Enna was shaking. "How did you know to come?" she asked.

"Gray."

Harry took wing, flying down the coast away from the City. When the City was out of sight, he landed on the beach next to the water. The beach was a thin strip of fine, light colored sand that on one side sloped away into the clear blue water and on the other side ended at a steep stone outcropping, grassy hills beyond. Enna looked around, and her face brightened with pleasure.

Harry put her down, and she took a few steps into the water, splashing around with her feet, wings fluttering. It didn't matter that she was getting wet, she was drenched already and Harry was wet from carrying her as well. "One minute I'm about to die, the next you come down and whisk me away to the beach," she said, smiling at him.

Harry watched her dance around, amused. "I don't think you were about to die," he commented. "It probably could have killed you before the others managed to stop it. What's happened since I left? How did you end up in that predicament?"

"It got chaotic for a while there, when they went down to find you gone. None of us that helped you were found out. Naturally people looked to your Hand, but they all had alibis, and they weren't really blamed, people just figured you were crazier than they thought. Your legend grew, you could say. You've escaped from the Keep not once, but twice." She laughed. "Your Hand was about to be disbanded, when I announced that I didn't trust anyone else and that I'd only leave my room if they were with me. So they kept working for my mother and traveling with us."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely. She kept her word on that.

"So then we were in the middle of setting up camp, and I was sitting by the stream with the others when something jumps out of the water and grabs me, dragging me downstream. They chased of course, and I'm not even sure my mother or the others caught on to what was

happening. I was feeling a tad pessimistic when you showed up out of nowhere.”

“Your mother is going to be upset that you’re gone,” Harry pointed out. “I think the others will get in trouble.”

“You can’t risk it,” she said in a convincing tone. “After all the effort went into sneaking you out, you can’t just get caught again. Besides, I’m safer with you.”

Harry sighed, nodding agreement.

“Get in the water, you!” she commanded, splashing at him.

“Is that an order, princess?” he asked stepping into the waves.

Enna nodded imperiously, and Harry splashed her back. They splashed about for a couple minutes; Harry went easy on her, and in the end he was just as wet.

Ren may or may not be scrambling to cover my absence, Harry thought. Gray, Sariah, Jon and Vosenn are probably getting their heads ripped off by the Queen, if I get caught here I may never see Hogwarts again, and somewhere lurking about this planet is a murderous ice lizard. Enna gave him a pretty smile. Oh... whatever.

Harry advanced on her menacingly, following her deeper into the sea and trying not to smile. She shrieked, backing up.

Harry frowned. That’s a really convincing shriek. She didn’t seem to be looking at him anymore. Turning to his right, he saw something rising up under the water. In a few seconds he was at Enna’s side, holding her tight and closely watching the water.

What surfaced took him by surprise; it was a pretty girl with long, mossy green hair. She flipped a fishtail at them, and Harry spotted her gills. She had a rather long face, but other than that and the gills and fins and tail she looked human. That’s the trick of the races, though... it’s like five Gods’ different takes on the same creature.

"A mermaid!" Enna exclaimed, thrilled. "Hello!" she said, waving. The mermaid smiled sweetly. Raising her hand, she motioned for them to follow.

"Swim?" Harry asked, wondering if mermaids were trustworthy. The mermaid shrugged. Retreating out of the water, Harry flapped his wings dry and Enna did the same. Holding hands they took to the air and followed the shape of the mermaid through the waves below them.

Behind them on the shore, the City became visible again, growing smaller as they left it behind. Ahead of them, a small island that had been barely visible from the land grew bigger. Disappointingly, it was nothing more than a large, lumpy pile of rocks.

"This has been a weird day from the beginning," Enna said. Ahead on the horizon, the sun was setting, but Harry only watched the vibrant colors reflecting off Enna's skin.

They landed on the edge of the rock, leaning down to see what the mermaid did next. She again motioned for them to follow, then dipped under the water. Resurfacing, she repeated this movement. The message was unmistakable.

"Maybe I should check it out first," Harry suggested.

"And leave me here?" Enna asked. "I think not."

They jumped into the water, trying to leap away from the rocks. The waves bobbed them around, and Harry put his face in his water and opened his eyes. The mermaid was waiting for him, alone. He didn't see where he was supposed to follow to; there was only the edge of the island.

"I'll port you out if anything goes wrong," Harry promised. He took a deep breath and submerged completely. The sound of the waves pounding on the rocks was dulled, and the last vestiges of light from the setting sun glowed on the surface above him. Enna was next to him, and he pulled her along as they followed the mermaid down. Suddenly the mermaid disappeared into the rocks. Harry grabbed

onto them and leaned in to investigate; there appeared to be a gap, an opening to a cave within.

Underwater cave... sensible thing to be diving into. If you happen to be a mermaid, that is. He stuck his head into the gap and looked around. Above him he saw the surface of the water again, dark now. He helped Enna through the gap and they kicked upward. Wings were useful underwater as flapping them effectively transformed them into sleek flippers. Resurfacing with a splash, Enna tried to catch her breath whilst Harry looked around, feeling fine. He realized they had come up into the island itself, an underwater cave that surfaced onto a wide ledge. On the other side of the ledge dark holes appeared to be the openings of smaller, dryer caves.

The two of them climbed up onto the ledge. Up above their heads, something glowed in a glass container that lit up the room with a faint light, it was too bright to look into and see what it was. Harry saw that Enna was shivering; the sun was now gone and the water had been much colder than it was in the shallows by the beach. Every inch of Enna was wet, and she began shaking with cold. Harry pulled her into his arms, trying to warm her up. She smiled gratefully, teeth chattering.

"What now?" she asked.

"I... don't know," Harry said, looking around the cavern. "This is interesting."

"Welcome," a voice resonated through the air, an old, knowing kind of voice. At the edge of the ledge a mermaid was pulling herself up, a different one. 'Their' mermaid had emerged somewhere nearby and was smiling serenely at them. The new mermaid was ancient in appearance; her hair was bluish gray and her eyes blank, missing irises and pupils. It was an alarming sight, Harry wondered if she was blind. "My granddaughter never learned your language," the old woman explained. "But she's a good girl... I am Luminae." Luminae's wrinkled skin was covered in a shifting pattern of blue and green colors that decorated her skin, as if it had just aged like that, like metal.

"How did you learn it?" Enna asked.

"My dear, I speak every language."

Harry and Enna looked at her with surprise.

"I see I must explain things," Luminae said wearily. "I'm touched, just as both of you are in different ways. I'm a priestess of the Goddess MindRuin. Those devoted to her develop the ability of Sight. That's how I know you are Harry Potter, a Halfling Silent, and the one with the sweet expression is the daughter of Queen Aeyris. The Queen and I have met, although not here. This is the secret grotto, sometimes we have guests that can't breathe in our environment and we put them here. I met Queen Aeyris at the shore, it wasn't necessary for her to find out about this place, especially since she would be too proud to get wet. "

"You knew we were coming?" Harry asked.

Luminae nodded. "This very evening I heard the voice of the Goddess speaking to me. She told me two young Silents were at the shore, and needed my help. I sent Nyra immediately, and here you are."

Harry and Enna shared looks of awe. "The Goddess MindRuin told you to take care of us?"

I wonder why she did that... Harry thought curiously. It isn't every day you have a Goddess watching over you... or is it? He looked at Enna. Maybe the Gods protect her because she's the next Queen?

Luminae nodded, blank eyes staring at the air in front of her as if it alone held the secrets of the universe. "There are caves back there furnished for visitors, you may make yourselves comfortable. Stay as long as you like, it's an honor to do as the Goddess bids us. Nyra and I will sleep in the water."

Both of them disappeared under the surface of the dark water, and he could faintly see their shapes settling down to the bottom of the

cavern. He did realize he was tired, then, he probably hadn't been sleeping long before his abrupt awakening.

"This is the safest we're going to get, tonight," Harry said to Enna. "The ice lizards were probably tracking your movements; I've now ported far away. And your mother can't find me here, so I can sleep without worrying about that. And it seems we have a Goddess coming to our rescue."

Enna nodded sleepily. They went to explore the back caves, a series of small rooms containing various furniture, mostly low beds. One of the first rooms they found was long and held three beds, each with blankets carefully folded on them. The frames of the beds were made out of what looked like driftwood, and the blankets were a strange, thick, woven fabric. The rooms were thoughtfully decorated with bits of coral and pretty stones. Harry decided he liked the mermaids. Once again, they're very different from Earth mermaids... Earth mermaids were creepy, and seemed violent. This is how mermaids should be.

Unfolding her blankets, Enna crawled into the far bed and Harry took the next one over, between her and the door. He pulled the blanket up to his chin and closed his eyes, slowly falling back asleep...

Only to be awakened once more. Someone was tugging at his blanket, groggily he looked around. Enna stood next to him. He watched as she pushed at him slightly, slipped under the covers tucking them back up, and then cuddled up to his side.

"What are you doing?" Harry whispered, although there wasn't anyone around to hear him.

She was still wet and shivering fiercely. "I'm freezing."

I can't send her away... she'll freeze. And it's much to damp in here to make a fire.

Tentatively he turned slightly to face her, and folded a wing down over the both of them. "So warm..." she mumbled sleepily, curling up against his chest.

Hmm. This is nice. To think, two hours ago I was in the Gryffindor common room with Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Ren. How do these things keep happening to me?

Harry thought Enna's presence would keep him from sleep, but he was wrong. Almost immediately it seemed like he was blearily opening his eyes, looking around to reorient himself to his surroundings. Enna was awake, and watching his face.

"Good Morning," he said, sitting up.

"What now?" she asked with a sigh.

"I don't know..." Harry said hesitantly. "We can't stay here."

"Why not?" she asked teasingly, although he could tell she wasn't serious. "I know... I do have to get back. I just feel... unsafe."

"The others don't have much of a chance against an ice lizard, do they?" he agreed. "We need to come up with something."

He had an idea, but the Queen would never agree to it.

"We need to get in touch with your mother if we're going to make any firm plans," Harry reasoned. "She would go ballistic otherwise. But we need to do so while keeping me out of her reach."

"Why don't we ask Luminae?" Enna suggested.

"Right..." Harry agreed, that obvious answer not having occurred to him yet. "Good thought."

They got up, Enna grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders tightly as they went down to the water. She reached out and splashed it lightly, and deep in the water they saw movement as the two sleeping mermaids floated up to reemerge.

Nyra whistled at them, she sounded happy. She held out her hand and offered a pretty shell to Enna, who took it. It had deep ridges, and Nyra ran her fingers through her own hair.

"I think she's telling me my hair is a mess," Enna laughed. It was only slightly mussed; Enna had the kind of hair that was so silky fine and straight that it appeared almost fluid. It seemed to fall back into place perfectly all the time.

"I'm sorry if we woke you," Harry told Luminae, who shook her head.

"How may I be of service, little birds?" She asked, sliding up onto the ledge where her pearly scales shone dully, reflecting the glow from above.

"Have you received any further instructions?" Harry asked, feeling her white sightless eyes resting on him.

She looked up and away from them, expression blank. Slowly she began to nod. "Yes."

"What now?" Harry asked. Enna was listening closely.

"This is a safe place for your princess," Luminae promised. "You can leave her here without fear. This grotto is protected by the Goddess. But you—" She pointed at Harry ominously. "Are needed elsewhere."

That was cryptic.

"Take my hand." Luminae reached out toward him. Harry took a firm grip on her slippery fingers.

The room blurred slightly; Harry closed his eyes almost involuntarily and a scene unfolded behind his eyelids. Somebody was cowering against a wall, facing them was an ice lizard, perhaps the same one as before, advancing threateningly.

"These nasty monsters just don't go away!" Harry exclaimed angrily. He felt like he was in the room with them, he carefully took a good look at the wooden walls.

He his eyes, the room remained. Harry growled at the ice lizard and it backed up, thrashing angrily at the intrusion. It fixed its icy glare on him and tried to leap and knock him over, but Harry slammed it back to the ground. Silently it backtracked to the far wall and disappeared. Harry inspected where it had disappeared, dumbfounded. How do they keep doing that? Can they port? That's not possible, right?

Remembering the unknown occupant to the room, he turned. He was rather surprised by what he found. Two children—well, not small children, they were probably ten years old—crouched together against the wall, a boy and a girl staring at him with identical faces. Twins.

Which wasn't that odd really, but it was their appearance that had made him double take. 'The Vineadryads are eerie', 'bizarre looking', 'kind of a cross between a veela and a mandrake'.

They were very short, light skin uncommonly brown in tone. Instead of hair a mass of vines and leaves grew from their heads, and they were clutching at each other with not two, but four arms each. As they stared at him, he noticed the boy had brown eyes and the girl's were a bright leafy green. She also had flowers growing among her... vines. They were wearing short simple clothes out of a green meshy material.

"I'm not going to hurt you, I promise," Harry said, stepping back and trying not to scare them.

Slowly they straightened their legs and stood up, hand in hand... in hand in hand.

"Who are you?" The girl asked softly.

"My name is Harry," he introduced. "I'm a Silent... you must be Vineadryads, right?"

They nodded.

"Are you some kind of royalty or something?" Harry asked on a hunch.

They shrugged in unison. "Something like that," the girl spoke again.

Harry shook his head. "At least we have a pattern. Is there someone here I can talk to?"

They nodded and edged around him, heading for the door. The room was entirely circular and made out of wood, the door was an arched opening with a heavy curtain. A mattress lay on the floor in the corner.

"Mother?" The girl asked, pulling the curtain aside and leaning through. The boy stuck to her side, eyes never leaving Harry, suspicious.

"Good morning Shetha," a gentle voice said liltingly through the curtain. "How was your sleep?" The name Shetha was pronounced short and smooth, flowing off the tongue.

"Not very good," Shetha said miserably. "A monster almost got us."

"Really?" The woman asked, sounding slightly amused.

"Really! It was big and scaly and white and had claws," Shetha insisted. "It almost got me and Thamn!"

There was a startled silence, and Harry had the feeling their mother recognized the description of the ice lizard; she probably was warned about them.

"There's someone here," Shetha added. "He saved us."

Footsteps neared quickly and the curtain drew back. The woman standing in the doorway resembled Shetha greatly, on her head a crowning glory of vines cascaded over her shoulders and through the air, in full bloom. She stared at Harry with her bright green eyes taking her children by the shoulder and pulling them back.

"Silent," she recognized.

"Sorry for intruding," Harry apologized. "A Mer-Priestess told me I was needed here, and I came as fast as possible."

"His name is Harry," Shetha said knowledgably. Thamn still hadn't said a word.

"I am Unea," the woman stayed in the doorway, uncertainly. "I thank you, for my children."

"An ice lizard recently came after our Princess," Harry told her. "Why do you think it was after your children?"

"It wanted Shetha," Unea said without hesitation. "She's special."

Shetha smiled proudly, and Harry winked at her. "I'm sure."

"I should have watched them more carefully," Unea scolded herself woefully. "Will you be coming along, Harry?"

"Along?" Harry asked. "Where to?"

"Queen Aeyris sent a messenger in the middle of the night," Unea explained. "To meet with her at the middle of the God's Landing."

I need to see Aeyris anyway, Harry considered. Enna is safe... He nodded. "I'll come along."

Shetha looked pleased, and the vines on her head writhed slightly, like a medusa.

## Chapter Twenty: Gods' Landing

A river wound below Harry like a twisting ribbon, and he circled momentarily so the Vineadryads wouldn't fall too far behind. He was tracking their progress from the air; they were following the river through the heart of the Ayan Wilderness.

He probably shouldn't have been surprised, but he left the twin's bedchamber to find that he'd been in a tree, one of the largest he'd ever seen. The walls in the room had been wood, and round, after all. A home for a Vineadryad was series of hollows in trees connected by hanging rope bridges, far above the forest floor. It had been a good place to take off from.

The Vineadryads moved deftly through the forest, sometimes through the branches, sometimes on the ground, and wading in the river when necessarily. Harry swooped lower to glide above their heads. Unea, Shetha and Thamn were accompanied by an adult male Vineadryad Harry took to be the twins' father, and two other males along to as protection. Harry would have assured them that he could watch over them, but he didn't know how long they would be traveling together. It had only been two hours or so since he had ported into the room in the tree, and the Vineadryads were swift for people so small.

Seeing a shadow above them, they ducked and looked up. Harry landed ungracefully between the trees. He had to tuck in his wings earlier than what was required for a smooth landing; otherwise he would hit them on the trunks.

"What's the Gods' Landing, anyway?" Harry asked Unea.

She looked at him skeptically, and once more Harry hated not knowing common facts about this world.

"Origin is very large, as you well know. This piece of it, where we are right now, is called the Gods' Landing. This is the only part of Origin where Silents, Vineadryads, Centaurs, Bloodbeasts and the Mer live side by side. The rest of Origin is covered in large sections of either mountains, forest, plains, desert, or ocean, and usually only occupied by one or two of the Races. The humans don't really count, they

seem to be everywhere, and they don't have much to do with the Gods. It's called the Gods' Landing because it's believed to be the place where the Gods descended from the sky together and first set foot on Origin. From then on, they went their separate ways and established territories."

"So the middle of the Gods' Landing would be...?" Harry asked.

"Your people," Unea continued, and Harry realized she meant the Silents, "Were able to determine from above where the exact shortest distance between the Ocean and the Pit was, as well as the approximate middle, located somewhere in the Centaur plains. It's been a fairly common meeting place. The Mer-people don't usually participate, they would have trouble getting there and they're generally elusive and uninterested in land matters."

Shetha suddenly stood next to him, nudging him. "Harry, can I fly with you?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't see why not, if your mother says it's alright."

Unea's eyes narrowed. "I think not."

Shetha looked put out.

"I won't drop her," Harry promised. "I carry people all the time, it's not hard."

Unea looked him over, raising her eyebrow pointedly at his black wings.

"I'm well behaved," he said with a smile. I haven't lost my temper in a while.

"Please mother?" Shetha pleaded.

Unea looked away with a sigh.

Shetha took that as a yes. "Hooray!"

Thamn caught up to her side, tugging on her arm. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

"Oh, I'll be right back Thamn, don't worry."

Harry looked around trying to find a good place to take off, and realized he was going to get wet; the only real gap in the trees at this point was at the river. He leaned down and gestured for Shetha to climb on between his wings and she promptly did. She was small and light and had a good grip on his shoulders. Must be from climbing trees. It was odd feeling two pairs of hands instead of just one.

Harry stepped into the river, rapidly flapping his wings. Thamn and Unea looked on worriedly, but Harry pulled out of the suction of the water and left them all behind. Shetha held tighter with excitement as the trees dropped on either side of them until they broke through the canopy.

"Wow!" Shetha said with awe as the ground fell farther and farther away. "Higher!"

Harry laughed; she was a cute girl. He obliged.

Now everything was small and the river looked the size of a worm on the ground. Far ahead of them the forest ended abruptly.

"The Divide!" Shetha exclaimed with wonder. "Then we're almost there."

They circled in wide loops, trying to pace with the others. Harry looked far in the distance; he thought he saw something in the air. He glided lower. His sharp vision focused in on those far specks: first they looked small birds, and then he could tell they were Silents. They can't have seen me, my vision is better than theirs... better fly just above the canopy, I won't be as obvious.

Harry stuck to that plan, skimming above the trees. Around the time they reached the Divide the other Silents had disappeared from the sky, Harry assumed they'd landed at their destination. He knew he would soon be joining them.

Harry decided to walk with the Vineadryads, and landed, returning Shetha to her grateful twin.

"Why don't you want the other Silents to see you?" Shetha asked him, and Harry looked down at her with surprise. "I'm not stupid," she told him. "You were trying not to be seen."

Unea had overheard, and was listening with interest. "Yes, do share."

"I ran away," Harry admitted. "The Queen is looking for me. I'm coming along to keep an eye on you, but I'm also hoping to negotiate terms."

"A fugitive, then!" Shetha said as if that were the most exciting thing she'd heard all day.

"You're a bad influence on her," Unea said disapprovingly.

Harry frowned. That was harsh.

"I apologize, that was tactless," Unea corrected herself. "I may be over-protective sometimes when it comes to Shetha."

Shetha nodded vigorously when Unea wasn't looking, and Harry suppressed a laugh.

They walked silently for some time, moving into the hilly plains. Harry recognized the scenery from the time he'd visited the Centaurs. Ahead appeared a line of boulders spaced evenly apart, curving away from them. They Vineadryads moved confidently through the gaps, and Harry split off to step behind one of the boulders.

Unea observed this, and then winked. "I'm in your debt, after all."

Harry leaned around the boulder slightly to peek in. The line of huge rocks curved into a complete circle, creating many entranceways into a crater-like dip in the ground, like an amphitheater of dirt. The group of people standing in the center turned to watch the Vineadryads join

them. He quickly scanned over the faces, trying to recognize them. He was surprised by the diversity of the group.

Queen Aeyris was there in greatest force, accompanied by Iz, Madalena, Gray, Jon, Vosenn, Sariah and four other Silents unfamiliar to Harry. The eldest Centaur, Enilor, was there with two of his companions, Eniladas, and the youngest Centaur Harry had met yet, a teen. The Chief-King Bloodbeast was there with his son, Harry was disappointed to see; both were eyeing the Centaurs with a look the Centaurs didn't seem to like, and understandably so. Once the Vineadryads stood with them their number seemed to be complete, as Aeyris flapped her wings for attention.

"Thank you for coming," She announced, "I've been in touch with all of you by messenger in recent weeks concerning the matter of the ice lizards invading our lands. I've called you here today as my daughter was directly attacked and nearly abducted. From what I hear, this targeting appears to be repeated."

"Yesterday my grandson," Enilor said, gesturing to the teen Centaur, "was nearly captured by one of these ice lizards. However our race is swift and he soon left them behind. I can't think of any reason he would be the subject of attack other than these creatures trying to affect me; other than our relation he's not involved with any matters of concern."

Everyone looked at the Chief-King. The Chief-King hung his head. "My eldest son was set upon by three of these monsters in his sleep. They tried to drag him away but he fought back and was killed in the struggle. My younger son Xaxx is the only child remaining to me."

Everyone bowed their heads solemnly at this. Harry had no great love for the Bloodbeasts, but shook his head at the loss anyway. The enemy of your enemy is your friend, after all.

"Where is your daughter now?" Enilor asked Queen Aeyris, noting her absence.

Harry noticed that Aeyris was looking pale and tense. "I haven't seen her since this morning... I'm afraid for her."

Even though he didn't like the Queen particularly much, Harry felt regretted that she had to worry. He needed to talk to her anyway, and this was as good a time as any.

"Enna is safe," Harry said clearly, stepping out into the open and facing everyone confidently. "I chased the ice lizard away, and they can't get to her where she is right now."

Shocked by his sudden arrival, Aeyris gaped at him, the Silents reacted similarly and everyone else looked confused.

"The twins were attacked this morning as well," Unea said in that moment. "This young man showed up just in time to stop them from being abducted or injured."

"Been busy, Harry?" Madalena mused.

Queen Aeyris was turning red with anger, flustered. "You—"

With a swiftness that impressed even himself, Harry leapt to the top of the tall boulder nearest to him. Perched there, he looked down at them, a position that declared a double meaning. Firstly it meant 'I won't be talked down to or ordered around,' and secondly, 'if you come any nearer I can take off from here and you'll never catch me'.

"Where is my daughter? Bring her back immediately. How did you get out of the Keep? Who helped you?" Aeyris questioned him relentlessly. "How can you just run around and risk sun-sickness?"

"She's out too far away, if you try to capture me or anything you won't be able to find her," by saying this Harry was letting them assume he'd brought her to another planet, which was to his advantage. "And no one helped me escape," he added. "I'm just talented." Harry had forgotten about the sun-sickness, though. "I haven't caught the sun-sickness yet, maybe I'm immune."

"I won't believe Enna's safe until I see her," Aeyris said.

Harry nodded. "I can bring her here. First I want an agreement on certain... conditions." He was feeling rather bold today.

Aeyris' eyes narrowed. "I'm listening," she said icily.

She was very good at intimidation. Harry tried to be fearless, but behind those golden eyes he knew she would be plotting something. "I'm free right now, and I'm not going to give that up. The only reason I came back at all is to help Enna, but I can't come around to help her if I have to fight for my freedom every time. It's in your best interest to agree to leave me alone. I've already proved you can't keep me confined, anyway."

Mid-conversation, Harry caught sight of something that chilled him—the murderous look in the piercing red eyes of the Bloodbeast Prince. He lost his brother today, Harry noted. And is now next in line to be Chief-King.

"For Enna's sake, then," Aeyris agreed, in a calm tone that surprised Harry.

I don't trust her, he decided.

Harry settled down a little, but showed his intent of staying on his boulder.

"The ice lizards have clearly established their objective," Enilor, the eldest Centaur said, changing the topic back. "They're trying to influence those in power."

"Some of the children, such as Enna, and the Chief-Prince, will be taking over for their nations one day," Iz elaborated. "Maybe the ice lizards are taking them to control the parents who care about them, maybe to brainwash them somehow."

"My grandson Miren could have been used to threaten me," Enilor reasoned.

"What about the twins?" Aeyris asked Unea. "Where is the Spring-Bringer?"

"We couldn't find her," Unea explained. "She's like that."

"Who's the Spring-Bringer?" the Bloodbeast Chief-King asked.

Unea looked at him, dismayed by his ignorance. "The most powerful Vineadryad. What, did you think Spring came by itself?"

The Chief-King grunted.

"Our race has always been very closely tuned in with nature," Unea explained further. "So much so that a number of us have the ability to influence it directly. I'm one of that number, and my daughter is as well. The most powerful Vineadryad is called the Spring-Bringer, she brings about Spring itself. She's the ultimate authority... when and if she can be found, she's elusive. She's indicated to us that Shetha will be the next Spring-Bringer, common enough knowledge that the ice lizards must have found out about it."

"How can the ice lizards be fought?" Unea's husband asked. "For the safety of the children?"

"Clearly not at all," the Chief-King insisted. "My son was a powerful warrior."

"It took three to bring him down," Iz pointed out.

"You can run," the young Centaur, Miren said. "That's what I did."

"It's not always a possibility," Unea told him.

"Harry's the only one I know who's killed one," Aeyris told them sourly. "They're extremely resilient."

Everyone turned their attention back to Harry; they'd nearly forgotten he was perched up there.

"What about other Cursed?" Enilor asked. "Have they been tested against ice lizards?"

"We have a couple patrolling the area," Iz answered, "But they haven't been in the right place at the right time in order to find out."

"A talent Harry keeps to himself," Madalena joked.

"I'd be perfectly willing to station some of my Hands as guardians," Aeyris offered.

"No," Unea said softly. "Thank you for the offer, but it's not reliable enough. I don't want to take any more risks."

"They need to be hidden... immediately, before the ice lizards regroup," Enilor proposed.

Everyone nodded agreement at this.

"Madalena?" Aeyris asked, and Harry's aunt seemed to know what she wanted.

"Harry?" Madalena called. "You're going to have to step inside the circle. It was built because this stone has a crystal center that's ideal for reflecting magic. I'm going to put up spell to block sound from traveling beyond the boulders."

Harry hopped down from his perch, and the air between the boulders seemed to intensify with tangible electricity.

"Is it done?" Aeyris asked.

She and the others can't feel it, Harry realized. Just like the spell on the fabric to preserve the ice lizard. You must only be able to feel it if you have a casting stone, or at least the ability to use one.

"There's plenty of worlds to choose from," Aeyris said.

"Yes, but most of them are dangerous," Unea pointed out.

Harry kind of liked Unea. She knows what she wants and isn't afraid of Aeyris.

Miren, Shetha and Thamn were all looking concerned, and Chief-Prince Xaxx looked grumpier than ever.

Thamn tugged urgently at Unea. "Shetha isn't going to leave me, is she?" he asked.

"No of course not," Unea told him.

"We're going to leave Origin?" Shetha said sadly, looking in the direction of the Ayan Wilderness, and then at her mother.

"Most likely," Unea confirmed.

"Harry, where have you been lately?" Aeyris demanded suddenly.

Has she gone completely mental? Harry wondered. Just what I need, the Queen of the Silents storming Hogwarts next time I've pissed her off enough that she's after my head. "I'm not going to just tell you!"

Madalena, however, was nodding. "That would be perfect!"

Harry was stumped. Madalena would know, of course, some of the important details of her brother's life, say, where he was for seven years and where he met his wife. "You can't possibly mean..." He glanced around the circle; everyone was looking at him expectantly. "Take all of them with me?"

"You could open the portal yourself," Iz said. "And you would be around to open one so they can return, there aren't any other Cursed out and about for that opportunity. The ice lizards wouldn't know where to start looking, and the children would have the protection of a proven ice lizard killer."

I don't like the word 'killer' applied to me, Harry thought, annoyed. "I don't think so," he told them. Shetha looked disappointed.

"You could keep an eye on Enna," Madalena pointed out.

Harry reconsidered. "No, I still don't think so." There's simply no feasible way for me to show up with extra students, somehow explain them. Besides, Hogwarts is a Wizarding School.

"At the very least open a Portal to Earth and we'll find a place for them to stay," Madalena pleaded. "Although nothing would be quite safer than..." She looked at him pointedly.

Harry sighed. That much is true.

"Who's going to Earth?" Harry asked.

"The smaller the group, the more inconspicuous," Iz said. "Enna, Miren, Xaxx, Shetha, and Thamn. They would need extra protection, and it would be much less obvious if they were with those of similar age. I'd say Gray, Jon, Sariah, and Vosenn would accompany them, they've confirmed they work together nicely with or without a Cursed."

"That's nine people!" Harry exclaimed. Plus Ren is ten from Origin.

"Go get Enna," Madalena said. "We'll come to some kind of decision."

With a sigh Harry ported away, visualizing the mermaid grotto. To his surprise and disappointment he found himself standing on top of the rocky island, instead of inside it as planned. It must have strong protection, he thought. I could get around the block around the Pit, why can't I do it here? He decided to try again. With added focus, he imagined the cave directly below him and tried to make himself go there. Amazingly enough, this time it worked, and he was standing on the ledge in the grotto.

Enna was sitting a few feet ahead with the mermaid Nyra. She was dipping her feet in the water, and they seemed a bit giggly. Language barriers didn't seem to have kept them from making friends.

Enna looked pleased to see him. "Hello Harry, Luminae told me you were off to see my mother, did it go well?"

"Well enough," Harry said, nodding. "She agreed to leave me alone, but we're having bigger problems with the ice lizards. You'd better come, your mother's worried."

Luminae surfaced suddenly, and her hands smacked down on the stone ledge with a startling wet slap that made him jump.

"What did you do that for?" She demanded. "How did you do that," she amended, gesturing to where he'd materialized, obviously referring to him porting into the grotto.

"... I'm back for Enna?" Harry stated, insure which answer the old mermaid was looking for.

"Don't do that any more," she commanded. "You'll weaken the protection around the secret grotto." She added in a mumble, "You're not supposed to be able to port in here."

"You mean we have to swim out?" Harry asked, and Luminae nodded vigorously.

"Let's go," Harry told Enna. "Thank you for your help and hospitality," he said politely to the mermaids.

Harry jumped into the cold water, Enna right behind him. He let her go first, and she dove down into the water, feeling for the way out with her hands before sliding through and out of sight. Harry followed, and a moment later they were both bobbing outside in the ocean water. Luminae and Nyra came out to wave goodbye.

Harry and Enna treaded water, hugging, and Harry went through the location in his mind. The middle of God' Landing... circle of boulders...

Instantaneously he was back, only a few yards from the meeting in progress. Unfortunately he brought a good amount of sea water with him, porting along all he'd been touching as well as what soaked his and Enna's clothes. The two of them appeared with a splash and a splat, drenching the ground they stood on.

Everyone looked at them incredulously.

Jon snorted. Gray shook his head, clearly amused, and Aeyris looked somewhat horrified. She took a step forward as if to hug her daughter, then paused and stayed her ground.

"I'm relieved to see you..." She assured Enna. Enna nodded acknowledgement, and wrung out her hair.

"We have a plan," Madalena told him, and Harry waited, wondering what else could possibly happen to his life, if it could get any weirder. "You return to your school," she told him. "Make a portal from here and leave it open, just hide the other side of it somewhere good. I'm going to use the amplifying power of the boulders to put up a protective shield. It won't hold past a couple days, but it will keep the ice lizards out. Everyone's going to need to camp out here for a bit. We need to get some things first, but when it's all ready I'll come through the portal and make arrangements, whether it is near your school or somewhere else on Earth."

Harry looked suspiciously at the Queen.

"I wouldn't betray you, Harry," Madalena insisted. "Do this for the sake of fighting the ice lizards."

If there was one thing Harry hated most, it was... well, Voldemort. But ice lizards came in second place, which is probably why he found himself nodding. What am I doing? He asked himself.

With a hug goodbye for Enna, and a wave intended for Madalena and Gray, he took a deep breath and prepared himself for the Void.

It didn't work. The Void was as terrible as ever, and as Harry left Origin behind he considered where to open the portal to. The Forbidden Forest is an option, as before but... it's likely someone, or some animal, may wander into it. The Shrieking Shack is okay... although if Madalena came through she wouldn't know where to go next.

Finally deciding on the best option, he stepped out of the Void directly onto the toilet seat in the furthest stall from the door of Moaning Murtle's bathroom. Good for hiding massive snakes, polyjuice potion, and portals to other worlds.

Harry put his disguise amulet on, wishing he had a shirt. Porting into his dormitory room dripping wet, he wondered what time it was.

## Chapter Twenty-One: An Assortment

Upon appearing in the corner of his dorm room, Harry glanced around quickly to make sure the room was empty. Relieved that it was, he quickly changed into his robes, leaning out the window to find the sun directly above.

He walked down the stairs to the Common Room, which was empty and silent. As he reached the bottom of the stairway the door behind the fat lady's portrait frame opened and Gryffindors came pushing in, chattering loudly to each other. It was a small crowd, but among them were Ron and Hermione. Seeing Harry, they looked confused, and headed his direction.

Uh oh, Harry thought worriedly. What are they looking confused for? Am I supposed to have some kind of excuse prepared? What if they ask me where I've been? What has Ren told them? I don't want to contradict her. Unfortunately, he couldn't see Ren anywhere.

"How did you get here so fast, Harry?" Ron asked.

What? That wasn't a question Harry had been expecting.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said truthfully.

"You were just heading in the other direction with Ren," Hermione prompted. "Now you're here."

"I had to come back for something," Harry told them. "Could... could you guys tell me what time it is?" he asked hesitantly.

They gave him the same confused look. "Lunch, Harry, you just had class with us and we were going to meet in the Great Hall for lunch," Hermione told him.

"Are you feeling alright Mate?" Ron asked him.

"Yes, sure, fine," Harry said.

The portrait-door opened again, and Ren leaned in casually. "Hey Harry, hurry up. You said you were going to show me how to find that book in the library."

"Right," Harry said, escaping to her side. Ron and Hermione waved good-bye, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief when the door closed behind him.

"I had no idea what was going on there," he told Ren.

She looked around the hall to make sure nobody was listening, but then looked at all the portraits lining the walls, realizing they would be eavesdropped on even if the hall was empty of students. She took his hand and dragged him away, checking doors until she found one unlocked and the room beyond vacant.

"Thank goodness you're back, I didn't know if I could keep this up any longer!" She exclaimed, giving him a hug.

"What IS going on here?" he asked.

Ren took a deep breath, squinting her eyes in the way he knew she did when she was focusing. To her left the air flickered momentarily and then a figure solidified; someone who looked exactly like Harry. The illusion lasted for a couple seconds before fading away.

"I couldn't sleep all night," she said, "And when morning came and you still weren't back, I first thought I would tell everyone that I'd seen you already and that you'd been feeling sick but... that really doesn't make any sense. What, you ran over to tell me, and then disappeared? And didn't go to the infirmary? So I made that. I've been keeping it up all morning."

"Wow," Harry said, extremely impressed.

"Probably one of the most difficult and draining spells I've ever done," Ren admitted.

"Weren't you worried that I would come back, show up and there would be two of me?" He wondered.

With a sly grin, Ren reached into her pocket and pulled out the Marauders' Map. "I borrowed this," she said. He'd shown it to her on her first day on Earth. "I've been trying to watch it constantly. But I also had to make sure nobody looked over my shoulder, even Ron and Hermione," She laughed. "They may have noticed that you were labeled 'Fake Harry Potter'."

"Genius," Harry praised. Ren is pretty powerful.

"So, what happened?" Ren demanded.

"Gray was with Jon, Vosenn, Sariah and Enna, and they were fighting an ice lizard that was trying to kidnap Enna. I fought it off, and they're all fine."

"How long were you on Origin?" she wanted to know.

"A day or so," Harry said. "You're never going to believe what they're planning."

"Really?" Ren said with interest. "I'm pretty open-minded."

"You're still not going to believe it," he assured her. He sat down and she followed suit, settling down while he reiterated the events of the past day. Ren nudged him and lifted her eyebrows when he told her about Enna and him at the grotto, he blushed. She listened with rapt attention as he told her about the Vineadryads, and eventually about the meeting. When he got to the conclusion of the meeting and Madalena's decision, she opened her mouth in an 'o' of surprise.

"When are they getting here?"

Harry shrugged. "No way to know."

Ren handed him the Marauder's Map. "You better watch for when they come through. Are you sure nobody uses that bathroom?"

"I'm sure."

After that they went to lunch, and then they had afternoon classes. Dean Thomas mentioned how Harry must be feeling better, as he had ‘seemed zoned out all morning’. Harry just nodded agreeably.

By dinnertime, nothing had happened yet. Harry and Ren were taking turns checking the Mauraders’ Map, when Ren suddenly poked him hard in the side and gave him a meaningful look. Harry left the meal, hurrying to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Three people stood there: Madalena, Lexian and Amanda. Surprised by the last two and the fact that both his aunts and his uncle had all come to Hogwarts, Harry stepped in and said “Hello” kind of dumbly. Amanda greeted him warmly, and Lexian looked about himself skeptically. Harry was a bit unsettled by the sight of Madalena and Lexian without wings, and they looked just as uncomfortable.

Madalena showed him the disguise amulet around her neck. “I have a pile of these,” she told Harry. “A full set for everyone.”

“They aren’t hard to make?” he inquired.

She shook her head. “For me, no. Yours was difficult because it was a special case. These are all not as refined, they only hide what’s on the outside.”

“Why them?” Harry asked Madalena, gesturing to Ren’s parents. Madalena just smiled in response.

“Madalena has a plan,” Lexian told Harry. “You can go pretend you don’t know we’re here yet, we need to talk to whoever’s in charge here.”

“That would be Dumbledore,” Harry told him.

“Yes, we know,” Lexian assured him. “Now go.”

“See you soon,” Madalena said as Harry disappeared to return to dinner, worried but curious what they were up to.

As he took his seat between Ren and Hermione, Ren leaned over and asked quietly in his ear, “Are my parents really here?” She patted the Mauraders’ Map in her pocket.

Harry nodded before taking a bite of his steak.

“Aren’t the Professors going to wonder how they got here from Origin?” Ren pointed out.

Harry shrugged. “They’ll know they went through a portal. The only thing we need to keep from them is the fact that I made it.”

They watched the staff table carefully. About half an hour later Filch approached the Headmaster and spoke to him in an undertone, and Dumbledore left the Great Hall. Soon Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Sprout followed. Right as Harry and his friends were all about to go to Gryffindor Tower for the night Filch approached them as well.

“You two are needed by the Headmaster,” Filch said gruffly, gesturing to Harry and Ren. Harry looked at his housemates and shrugged.

Once again Ren and Harry found themselves stepping into the Headmaster’s office to find the teachers looking at them curiously, only this time there were three other people under the same scrutiny.

“Ren!” Amanda exclaimed happily and Ren ran wordlessly to be embraced by her mother. Lexian smiled, giving his daughter a hug too.

“Hello Harry,” Madalena said calmly.

“Harry?” Dumbledore asked. “Is it correct that this is your Aunt, and those two are Ren’s parents, also your Aunt and Uncle?” Harry tried to decipher what the Headmaster could be thinking, but as usual it was a mystery. Dumbledore’s expression betrayed nothing.

Harry nodded. Everyone seemed to be looking at Lexian mostly. “Do you realize how much you look like James?” McGonagall asked Harry’s uncle unexpectedly.

That's Madalena's plan, Harry thought. Well, part of it anyway. She brought them because they know most about Hogwarts from James and Lily.

"James was my older brother," Lexian told them. "I've heard a lot about this place."

"Yes, we have," Amanda agreed. "Lily was... my closest friend. I thank you for taking my daughter Ren. Lily would have been thrilled that Ren came here, she always spoke highly of this place, and all of you."

Everyone looked flattered, and nostalgic.

"Well, James and Lily were close to our hearts," Professor Sprout said. Professor Snape was looking uncomfortable in the midst of all the mushiness.

"You came here from Origin through a portal nearby?" Dumbledore prompted, and the visitors nodded.

"I have a dire matter to discuss," Madalena said somberly.

"Go ahead."

She took a deep breath, and began. "You were in Origin recently. Did you hear about the ice lizards?"

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Lord Marr informed us of the situation."

"They've been becoming bolder," Madalena continued. "They've been targeting the children of various authority figures in Origin, and the children are in danger. We're going to move them to Earth and hide them as well as we possibly can." She leaned forward, speaking calmly and charismatically. "We know this is the safest more protected place on Earth, and the children could blend in as students. Please consider taking them in."

The professors, except for Dumbledore, looked amazed; Dumbledore looked calm and insightful as usual. “Hmm,” he said thoughtfully.

“Hmm?” Professor McGonagall repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean Headmaster?”

“Lord Marr and the others, such as the guide, did us a favor in Origin by taking us in and showing us around,” Dumbledore said. “How many children did you say there were?”

“I didn’t.” Madalena said. “Nine.”

“Nine what?” Professor Flitwick exclaimed. “Nine children?!”

“Yes,” Madalena said, looking at them calmly.

“How exactly can we just add nine extra students?” Professor Snape demanded. “We’re already returning the favor to the City Lords by accepting Ren!”

Ren and her parents looked injured by his ferocity, and Lexian opened his mouth to retort.

“Calm down, Severus,” Dumbledore commanded. He gave Lexian an apologetic look, and Lexian was silent.

“If these children are being targeted by monsters,” McGonagall pointed out, “Wouldn’t that bring danger here? We have to think of the students.”

“There is no way for the ice lizards to know we’re coming here,” Madalena assured them. “As long as there isn’t a fuss over them and no one gives them away, it will be fine. And everyone involved has a personal stake in the children’s safety.”

“Do these children have Wizarding abilities?” Professor Flitwick asked.

Madalena frowned. “I’m not certain. Some of them do.”

"This is a preposterous idea," Professor Snape said in a low voice.  
"It's unheard of."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "But sometimes preposterous ideas are the very best ones. It's a unique situation, and Hogwarts has always been a haven for those in need of it."

This brought most of the professors around to his side, their faces softened. Professor Snape snorted in disapproval.

"I say, bring them here and let's have a look at them," Dumbledore told Madalena, who smiled.

"I'll return shortly," She announced and left the room.

"How's Ren doing in her classes?" Amanda asked.

"Really well," McGonagall said. "I'm impressed; she's been catching up to the curriculum remarkably well."

"Hermione Granger has been helping me," Ren admitted, blushing.

"Something has been on my mind," McGonagall revealed, talking to Lexian and Amanda. "The Potters were a well known pureblood family, but you three aren't called 'Potter', and I really don't think the Potters come from Origin. I met them several times before they passed away and we had some mutual friends. How exactly is James Potter related to them?"

Lexian smiled. "We have a relation to the Potters; although a bit more distant than James let on... we did them some favors. They willingly took him in during his time on Earth."

McGonagall didn't seem particularly satisfied with this answer, looking only more puzzled.

The door reopened, and Madalena returned, followed by a long line of young, very human looking people. Harry watched them crowd in, marveling at how Shetha looked with normal hair and only one pair of arms. He caught Enna's eye and smiled. Most of them looked mostly

like themselves. Jon, Vosenn, Sariah, Gray and Enna just didn't have wings anymore, Miren the centaur had the lower body of a human, and Thamn looked like Shetha. Xaxx had undergone the biggest transformation, he looked quite different. Harry did notice that he was missing the fingernail on his right index finger.

Madalena introduced everyone, Xaxx was introduced as Zack, his name was perhaps a little too odd for Earth.

"What now?" Lexian asked.

"Well we can't put them all into one house," Dumbledore said. "We need to sort them so that they're dispersed, placed among those they will get along with best. We'll have a private Sorting Ceremony, right here, right away." He explained the houses, and the sorting hat.

Madalena looked intrigued. "The hat tells you where they should go?"

"It can also tell us if they have magical abilities or not," Professor McGonagall added.

"And if they don't?" Amanda asked anxiously, looking with motherly concern at Enna.

"I think I have an idea," Professor Flitwick announced. "Absorption wands."

"What are those?" Harry asked, he'd never heard of absorption wands before.

"They're a sort of trick wand," Professor Flitwick explained in his squeaky voice. "You flip them one way, and instead of casting spells, it absorbs them. Then if you hold them in the correct direction and say the incantation, the spell is released. We can provide them with the spells they need for their classes, but they need to keep their spell use to a minimum. Absorption wands aren't commonly used because they're draining on the wizard storing spells in it, and they don't last too long. But it should do the trick."

Dumbledore sifted through some papers, and pulled out the parchment that already had Ren's name on it. "We can begin. We'll write down their names and their houses, here."

"... can I try it?" Ren asked curiously, looking at the Sorting Hat. She'd watched the Sorting on the first day of term. "I've wondered what it would say."

Dumbledore nodded and she put the hat on her head. Predictably enough, it immediately pronounced her Gryffindor. She grinned and looked satisfied, then passed it on.

The nearest person to her was Shetha. Shetha proved to have Wizarding ability, her brother Thamn not quite as much, although he had a little. Both became Hufflepuff first years; it turned out that the twins were older than Harry had thought. They looked so young because of their diminutive size; it was just a Vineadryad trait. They were both just as short in human form.

Gray was a Ravenclaw sixth year, full magical ability, and Miren was a Ravenclaw seventh year with absolutely none at all.

Xaxx was a Slytherin. No surprise there.

Enna was a fifth year Hufflepuff, and so was Sariah.

Jon was a Gryffindor, to Harry's pleasure, he'd missed his friend. The only real surprise to him was Vosenn. The hat sat on her head for some time before deciding she would do best in Slytherin.

"We have a good variety, that's good," Dumbledore commented. "They'll be less noticeable that way."

Gray and Shetha were the only ones who would get their own, real wands. Thamn and Enna as well both had a little magic, but not enough, they would get trick wands like the rest.

"Before it gets too late, these... new students should be off to bed. Professor Sprout, will you take your four new charges to their dormitory? Severus, these two are yours now; Flitwick, you can show

these two young men where the Ravenclaw Common Room is. The last one can accompany Harry to Gryffindor tower. I'll see to it that room is made for you and extra beds provided," Dumbledore said.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Madalena said graciously and the students all murmured thanks. Dumbledore nodded in acknowledgement. As they all filed out, Harry found himself standing next to Gray.

"Meet me first thing tomorrow?" Gray whispered.

"The Library," Harry decided. "You can ask anyone, they can tell you here to find it."

They took off in their separate directions from then on, and Madalena slipped away with Ren's parents.

"This is pretty dark," Jon commented, eyes roaming over the halls. He looked at Harry sideways, speculatively. "It's good to see you again, Harry."

Harry smiled with relief; Jon at least seemed to have forgiven him for deserting his Hand. "Good to see you too." He showed Jon the fat lady's picture frame, but after stepping through into the dark Common Room said, "I'll be right back," and ported to Moaning Myrtles' bathroom. It was empty. He knew his aunts and uncle would have gone through by now, and the portal needed to be closed. Harry peered curiously into the last stall. It was empty, but he looked it over carefully, closely. The portal is here, but can I see it? And how do I close it?

Finally he spotted it—a glimmer of blue. Leaning in, he saw a sparkling line extending up from the top of the toilet tank. If it was the same thread he'd seen the Void, he could disrupt it and the portal would close. He waved one hand through the line, it snapped and disappeared. Good, he thought with satisfaction. I think I've got this portal thing down.

He joined Ren and Jon who were patiently waiting for him in the Common Room.

Jon was standing on one of the plushy armchairs, jumping on it. Ren was watching, amused.

"Congratulations," Harry told Jon, and Jon hopped down as he saw Harry. "Gryffindor is the best house."

"I'd agree and maybe even join in on your... leaping fun, but I'm dead tired. Goodnight," Ren gave Harry a pointed look. "You realize this is going to be crazy, having all these... Originians here."

"Originians?" Harry laughed.

"Well that's what we're called, right?" Ren asked. "I've never thought of the appropriate word before because usually everyone is from Origin so you don't have to label them."

"I'm not tired," Jon announced, looking around the room as if looking for something to mess with.

"Yes, but we don't have time to baby-sit right now, so go to bed," Ren ordered.

Jon looked hurt. "I don't need to be baby-sat."

"Let's go, Jon," Harry said, pulling Jon up their staircase while Ren left to the girls' side.

When Harry woke up the next morning, it was a good hour and a half before classes would start, and he had a cousin to meet with. His dorm mates were all fast asleep, including Jon in the extra bed that had been waiting for him the night before. Dumbledore could sure get things done fast when necessary.

Ren was sitting down in the empty common room. "What?" she asked. "I heard you two planning. I want to see Gray, too."

"Of course," Harry said, and they left in the direction of the library.

Gray was already there, sitting in front of a stack of books.

Ren had to practically yell to get his attention. "HEY GRAY. WE'RE HERE."

Gray looked up with surprise, blinking. "Oh. Hello."

"How long have you been here, Gray?" Harry asked, amused.

Gray didn't answer his question, confirming Harry's suspicion that Gray had immediately asked for directions to the Library and had already been up for several hours.

"This library is amazing!" Gray exclaimed, getting to his feet "Look at all these books!"

"We need to introduce him to Hermione," Ren said dryly. For a moment she held back, but then stepped forward and enveloped Gray in a big hug. "I was worried about you for a while there."

Gray looked slightly surprised, and patted her on the head. "I've missed you too."

Ren stepped back quickly. "I wouldn't go so far as to say I missed you."

Harry laughed, and Ren glared at him. "Nothing," Harry said, "Just thought of a funny joke is all."

They sat down in the chairs around the table Gray had claimed, while Gray moved his book stack to the floor so that they could see each other.

"So, what's happened since I left and opened the portal?" Harry asked.

"Harry caught me up to events up until that point," Ren assured Gray.

"Well, quite a few things have happened over the last three days," Gray started.

"It's been three days?" Harry asked. This is getting way too confusing. "I have to admit, I still don't fully understand the way it works. Here I was gone for half a day, while I spent a little over a full day in Origin. Now another half day has passed, but in Origin it's been three days? That doesn't make any sense."

"You're not supposed to understand how it works," Gray told him. "It has nothing to do with the relationship between Earth and Origin. It has everything to do with the Void. As you know very well, portals travel through the Void, and the Void makes absolutely everything unpredictable and inconsistent. For instance you can open two portals going to the same place, right next to each other, and have two people step into one at the exact same time, but you can arrive days apart. People stopped trying to understand the Void millennia ago."

"But as a general trend time seems to pass faster on Origin," Harry. "So how can I have grown up here, and you grown up there, but you're not twice as old as I am?"

"Because time only varies when there's a portal involved," Gray explained. "None of us passed through portals often and went through the Void, so time has been nearly parallel. In addition, you were born on Origin and so you'll always be attuned to Origin- time, no matter where you are. At least that's the theory."

"I'm just... not going to think about it any more," Harry decided. I'll just give myself headaches.

"Wise choice," Gray said. "So anyways several things happened... let me think. Well Aunt Madalena set up that spell, and we built up some tents and have been camping in the spot where you left us. We put a couple of small pebbles around the portal to mark its location so nobody would stumble into it by mistake. Aunt Madalena is almost positive the portal can't be traced— though you would know best, what do you think?"

Harry pondered this. "Well... I know there are dozens of portals leaving Origin for other worlds, but when I'm in the Void I can only

see the ones I make, I've never seen others. If I can't see their portals, nobody else can see mine. Your threads are personal."

"Threads?" Gray looked intrigued. "Never mind, we can talk about that another time. Madalena then brought her disguise amulets; we put them on and have been traipsing around the circle like idiots."

"Why?" Ren asked curiously.

"To get used to them of course," Gray responded. "We Silents all staggered around unbalanced, unused to our new center of gravity. Shetha and Thamn keep dropping things, and Xaxx doesn't seem to be able to chew properly. He'd take a bite of meat, chew for a couple seconds and then swallow, but his human teeth aren't good enough for the speed he tries to eat things and he choked about three times. And then there's Miren!" Gray shook his head. "For someone used to four legs, two legs came as a big challenge. He fell on his face every time he stood up for two days; he's still a total klutz."

"Sounds like fun," Harry commented, sorry he'd missed it. It would have been comical.

"The Queen was gone for the first day, she'd gone to the shore to consult with the mer-folk," Gray continued. "She asked them if they were having any conflict with the ice lizards, but they told her that ice lizards don't swim. They're too dense, they sink. Also they're so scattered out there in the ocean that there isn't a leader. The only people of importance are the priestesses, the prophets, and I'd like to see an ice lizard sneak up on them, the seers would see them coming hours before they even get there."

"True," Harry agreed. "I think I'd enjoy watching an ice lizard try to swim."

"Me too. Oh right!" Gray exclaimed. "And then there was the Chief-King. When you were at the meeting, he was too distraught for words over the death of his oldest—and in my opinion, favorite son. But after staring at nothing at all for a day in a half, he confronted our Queen and said he wanted to send his own protection along for Xaxx. The Queen told him there was no room, and he said that she didn't

need four extra people along, that she should send two and he could send two. She explained that it wouldn't be a complete Hand anymore, and they argued for a good while longer before the Queen told him that it was her expedition, she was in charge and if he didn't like it he could take his son somewhere else and make his own portal. The Chief-King stormed off, but he left his son so we assumed he wanted Xaxx to come with us. I tried to talk to Xaxx, but he just glared at me. Madalena said she was worried about his loyalty but he overheard us, the circle isn't that big after all. He told us he's not stupid and wants to live. So we trust him, tentatively. But I'm to tell you to keep an eye on him. We should tell Vosenn though; she's in a much better position to do that. "

"I really don't like him," Harry said vehemently. "He attacked Phia and her sister, remember?" He gripped his claw at the memory. "Not to mention me as well."

"I remember," Gray said solemnly. "But Madalena says the reason the Queen is taking him along is because she doesn't want to get hostile with the Bloodbeasts. They can get pretty nasty, and they'd make a lot of trouble if we offended them in a big way."

"It's a good thing Xaxx and I aren't sharing a house," Harry said. "He'd try to steal this from me in my sleep, probably." He held up his claw before tucking it back under his robes.

"We brainstormed a couple rules right before we left," Gray said. "We're not to draw any attention to ourselves, obviously, or act like we know each other. Especially the Silents, we're not allowed to stand together in public, because a lot of students saw us in the City. Even if we look somewhat familiar, they probably won't make the connection, but if we stood in a group that would be pushing it."

Something occurred to Harry. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to know more about my father and the Potters? It's something I always meant to ask your parents about, but then the whole mess with the ice lizards happened and I never got the chance." Harry had been about to say 'the whole mess with Alexander' but had changed it to ice lizards at the last second. Alexander's siblings looked saddened at the reference anyway.

"Father told me the details after you left," Gray nodded. "James wasn't always called James... that's not a Silent name. Before going to Earth his name was Jaim, but he decided to tell everyone his name was James, more for his own sake. New life, new name, that kind of thing. Then he met your mother and she knew him as James, so he stuck with it. But I still haven't answered your question... our family, the Raschadin clan, would be considered a medium sized clan. There's one particular branch of it that we're a part of, which has the reputation of being a little odd... both of our fathers ended up choosing human wives. That kind of thing is what makes others think we're odd, it isn't the first time. A couple generations ago a great, great uncle of ours moved to Earth and married into a Wizarding family: the Potters. It's been a few hundred years, but the Potter family had some traces of Silent blood in them, it was the family secret. James showed up and asked to be enrolled as their son; in return he brought them some gifts, old manuscripts and such from the Pit. The elderly Potter couple was both historians so they were thrilled, and 'adopted' James."

"Has there been Cursed in our family for a long time?" Harry wondered.

"Yes, since the very beginning."

"Do they... get married, have kids, that sort of thing?" Harry wanted to know.

"Every now and then. But when it comes to inheriting the curse, it doesn't even matter, it's in our blood. A Cursed can have normal children, and normal parents can have Cursed sons, just as you and Alexander kind of showed up out of nowhere and surprised everyone."

They'd been speaking in undertones, even though the library around them was still and empty. The silence was shattered as someone came through the front doors of the library and yelled "Harry!"

Harry turned around. "Hey Ron."

"You'll never believe it! There's some stranger sleeping in our room!"

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Trial of Differences

Ron, Harry and Ren sat down for breakfast with the other sixth year Gryffindors. Harry discretely looked around for Originians, Gray was just joining Miren at the Ravenclaw table, and the twins were among the Hufflepuffs.

"Did you see him?" Ron asked. He meant Jon, and his mysterious appearance.

The others nodded.

"He woke up after you left. His name is Jon, he's a visiting student," Dean Thomas said. "He's actually pretty cool."

"Oh," Ron said. Hermione wasn't up yet, Harry wasn't looking forward to her opinion on visiting students, he was sure there would be something contradictory in Hogwarts: A History about it, there usually was. Harry zoned out, imagining scenarios of how the new students were being received in their respective houses.

Ren leaned forward on her elbow, raising an eyebrow at him. Without turning her head she glanced toward the others pointedly. Harry tuned back into the conversation, understanding she was trying to direct his attention to it.

"Both of them, really," Seamus Finnigan was saying.

"But that one in particular," Ron insisted, and the others nodded, murmuring, "True."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked curiously.

"There's two new Hufflepuff girls," Dean said excitedly. "They're both beautiful but one of them is stunning."

"I wonder where they came from?" Seamus wondered.

"Who cares?" Ron asked.

Harry looked over to the Hufflepuff table. Enna and Sariah had entered together and were finding seats, it looked as if they'd made new friends already. They had caught everyone's eye immediately, whereas the twins went completely unnoticed. The first years were all new anyways.

"Wow," Ron murmured. "Look at her hair."

The chair next to him scraped away from the table, catching his attention, and Hermione sat down, obscuring Ron's view of Enna. "She looks like Phlegm," she said in a nasty tone.

"What?!" Dean and Seamus said together, confused.

"Never mind," Hermione said briskly, starting her breakfast.

"We should find out her name," Dean suggested.

Harry was silent, amused but slightly uncomfortable. Enna and I aren't... together, per say... I can't really protest.

"Oh, no way!" Ren said, twisting her head around to look at the far wall.

"What?" Harry asked, turning as well, looking over the other tables.

"You're not going to like it," she promised.

Worried, Harry tried to find what she was looking at. Finally he realized it wasn't at one of the other tables, but beyond, near the wide double doors. Vosenn was leaning next to the door, and Draco Malfoy stood close, bracing one hand against the wall so that he leaned over her. Harry and Ren watched quietly, but couldn't hear what was being said over the din from the students at breakfast. All they had to go on was body language.

"They're flirting," Ren said disgustedly.

"We'll just have to talk to her later," Harry said regretfully. He wanted to walk over and push Draco aside, and then threaten the blond

Slytherin into not talking to Vosenn. Once again, I'm not supposed to know her, he thought with a sigh.

Luckily as the day wore on it became apparent that Hogwarts had enough students that a couple extra here and there weren't noticed. Of course they were observed by the students in their own house, but one or two visiting or exchange students didn't seem so strange, when you didn't know all nine of them. The twins as first years were the most invisible, and Enna the most obvious because of her striking looks. There was something about her, an aura of sorts that made everyone like her immediately and want to protect the fragile girl.

"It's a Healer thing," Ren commented as they observed a number of Hufflepuff girls flock to Enna and Sariah. "They're special, you can feel it."

The two of them joined the Gryffindors by the fire in the Common Room. Jon too, had made immediate friends due to his charisma.

"I got detention," Jon announced ruefully.

"You've not even been here a day," Harry asked with disbelief. "What did you do?"

"That's irrelevant," Jon said, crossing his arms.

Harry sighed, exasperated, knowing he would probably be able to find out later.

Neville walked by, looking preoccupied.

Ron watched him, thoughtful. "Hey Neville, where have you been lately?" he asked curiously.

Neville stopped, processing that someone was talking to him and bringing his thoughts back to the present. "Oh, Hi Ron. I've been in the greenhouses. Just helping out Professor Sprout and stuff."

"Sounds interesting," Ron said, though he sounded unconvincing.

Neville nodded enthusiastically. "Well there's these two Hufflepuff first years that help out there, too. They're twins, they're really nice. They're both really good with plants."

"Ah," Ron murmured.

"Especially the girl. She's amazing at herbology— she actually talks to the plants, she does it all the time. And believe it or not, I think they actually listen."

"Sure, Neville."

The next couple days went similarly. Harry was finding it hard to relax, he wished he knew what the Originians were all up to, it was stressful trying to keep up with all of them.

They were having Charms with the Slytherins on the fourth day. Flitwick was occupied with Crabbe and Goyle, he'd for some reason decided to try for the hundredth time to teach them a difficult spell successfully, and had been tearing tufts of his hair occasionally at the futility. Hermione was tutoring Ren again, and Ren was listening attentively. Jon was leaning his chair back, not even trying, and doodling a flipbook comic onto the corners of his Charms textbook. Harry was done, and bored.

Vosenn got up from her chair and went to the window, looking out. This was Harry's first opportunity to speak with her, and quietly went to join her at the back of the classroom. The class was busy and didn't notice them, or overhear as Harry greeted her.

"How are you doing?" Harry asked politely.

Vosenn didn't answer, ignoring him and looking out the window.

"Oh right," he remembered their last encounter. "Are you still mad at me?"

She responded with an intense glare.

Harry folded his arms, irritated. “I don’t care if you’re mad. Just don’t let it get in the way if we need to work together. That would be unprofessional of you, wouldn’t it? I’m just here to warn you about Draco Malfoy.”

“Yeah? What about him?” Vosenn asked, jutting her chin out stubbornly.

“He’s not a very nice guy, just stay away from him,” Harry advised.

She took a step closer, staring him down. “Don’t tell me what to do, Harry.”

“You tell me what to do all the time!” he protested.

“That’s different,” she said. “I’m supposed to.”

Harry shook his head. This isn’t going well. Well I’m certainly not going to apologize; she’s just going to have to get over this. The barb about being unprofessional seemed to have stung, and she went back to giving him the cold shoulder.

“Hello Potter,” Draco said, giving Harry a slight push. He put an arm over Vosenn’s shoulder possessively and looked at Harry with contempt.

They seriously need to stop glaring, Harry thought. Draco’s going to regret pushing me.

“Stop that,” Vosenn said in a commanding way, and to Harry’s surprise Draco seemed to listen, putting Harry out of his notice as if Harry were no more than a harmless yet annoying bug.

“Do you always let—“ Harry started to say, but Draco spoke as if Harry wasn’t there.

“That Zack guy is here,” he told Vosenn.

“He actually came to class?” Vosenn said sarcastically. She didn’t seem to mind the contact with Draco.

I wouldn't think Vosenn is his type, Harry considered. I thought he likes the kind of girl he can boss around, that fawn over him all the time. Vosenn is definitely not one of those. He clenched his jaw. I can't believe she's still mad at me. I thought we were friends.

"That guy hates Harry Potter more than I do," Draco said. "If you believe it."

"No kidding," Vosenn agreed. "Do you think he had something to do with the cat?"

"What cat?" Harry asked, curious.

Draco glanced in his direction contemptuously. "Dead cat," he said. "Found it lying around this morning. Some sadistic fuck tore its head off."

"There was an owl yesterday, too," Vosenn added. "Creepy."

"Smells over here, don't it?" Draco said looking pointedly at Harry, leading Vosenn away. "We should go back to our seats."

Harry made fists with his hands. Vosenn looked over her shoulder at him, looking apologetic, expression shifting toward concern.

She's wondering if I'm going to snap, Harry thought. He made sure she could see his fists. Let her worry. Serves her right.

"What was that?" Ren asked as he sat back down, it looked like she and Hermione had watched at least the last part of their exchange.

"Looks like Draco has a new girlfriend," Hermione added.

"Something like that," Harry growled. They left him alone.

Harry and Gray bumped into each other in a mostly empty hall later than day, and Gray looked worried as he reiterated the conversation.

"Vosenn has issues, ignore her," Gray said. "I saw her with this Draco character... they're like fire and ice. It won't last."

"She's nothing compared to Xaxx," Harry pointed out. "I barely even see him; he just broods down in the dungeons or something."

"Have you talked to Enna and Sariah or the twins?" Gray asked.

"No, but Neville told me the twins are doing fine and they spend a lot of time in the Greenhouses. I haven't talked to Enna or Sariah because they have way too many friends... you can barely get within five feet of them. Jon is having a blast, though I still haven't found out what he did to get detention so quickly."

"I overheard," Gray said carefully, shaking his head. "Professor McGonagall was telling Professor Sprout about it."

"Well? What happened?"

"Snape walked into the bathroom, but Jon was already in there," Gray told him.

Harry gave him a blank look, perplexed. "So what?"

"This was Snape's personal bathroom. In his private quarters."

"... how did Jon get in there?" Harry wondered. That was dumb, he shouldn't be getting into trouble. It will only draw attention to him.

"It's Jon, you know how he kind of wanders into everything," Gray pointed out. "Who knows?"

"I almost forgot about Miren," Harry said suddenly.

"Miren is... fine. He's introverted, he doesn't talk to anyone, just kind of does his own thing. You don't have anything to worry about with that one."

"Right," Harry nodded. "That leaves just Jon, Vosenn, and Xaxx."

"They need to be responsible for themselves," Gray told him. "You can't watch them all the time."

"That's not it," Harry explained. "I'm not particularly worried. The ice lizards are far away, and none of them is completely stupid, they're not going to blatantly reveal who they are. I'm worried because... this is my school. I love this place and I don't want it to change."

"It's not going to be forever," Gray reassured him. "None of us are actually students."

"I don't know, if anyone deserves to stay it's Ren," Harry pointed out. "She seems to be actually trying; she's getting really good at the schoolwork."

"Ren..." Gray said thoughtfully. "Ren does fit. But the rest of us, we know we don't. We're not human and it doesn't feel right to pretend."

This made Harry uneasy. Am I a pretender?

"I should go," Gray excused himself, reaching out to squeeze Harry's shoulder before giving him an encouraging smile and continuing down the hall and out of sight.

At dinner, Harry was watching Enna. She can't be right over there, just across the room, and me not talk to her, he thought.

"You're staring," Hermione told him. She'd been extremely irritable about the recent obsession over the new girl among her male fellow Gryffindors. Especially, Harry had noticed, when it came to Ron.

"I have to find a way to talk to her," he said aloud. Hermione rolled her eyes in response.

Harry sneaked a glance over his shoulder at Draco and Vosenn, still arm in arm. It irked him. Vosenn just felt like... she belonged to his world, not Draco's. He didn't like her romantically, but for a short period of time the Hand had really knit together and he'd felt close to all of them.

Ron dropped his spoon, looking up over Harry's head. Harry turned to see Enna had made her way over from the Hufflepuff table and was standing behind him. "Hello," she said in a soft voice.

"Are you lost?" Hermione asked her, deadpan. "The Hufflepuff table is over that way."

Enna stared at Hermione, bewildered. Harry was taken aback as well, not sure what to make of her. Hermione isn't normally snide... maybe she's actually trying to be nice, and thinks Enna is confused. She really does think Enna is just like Fleur, he realized. Must be the hair.

Enna must have realized Hermione was making fun of her; she looked hurt and turned back to Harry. "I saw you watching me," she told him.

"Yeah?" He asked, smiling. "Do you want to sit down?"

Ren had been sitting to his left, she scooted her chair down the table and Harry grabbed an empty seat and put it in the free space.

"I'm Harry," he said, offering her his hand.

"Enna," she introduced, taking it shyly. "Nice to meet you Harry."

They sat down, all eyes were on Enna.

"I watch you too, you know," Ron said awkwardly.

"Oh," Enna said.

"So..." Harry looked for something to say. "You're new. How do you like Hogwarts?"

"It's wonderful," Enna said, folding her hands in front of her and turning to him attentively. "Everyone is so nice here."

Harry tried to determine how many people were watching her talk to him; her move to the Gryffindor table had attracted lots of attention.

Seeing him look at them, everyone pretended not to be watching, glancing away.

"You know, I'd probably be way more eloquent right now if there weren't so many people listening," he told her, and she laughed.

"You could always whisper," she suggested.

Taking her up on that, Harry leaned in so his lips were right next to her ear. "How's this?" he asked as quietly as possible.

"Just right," she whispered back.

I'm enjoying this, Harry thought. We were always in the middle of some kind of important trip, or dangerous situation, there was always something happening that was distracting. Here we don't have to worry about ice lizards, or her mother. We can just be ourselves.

"Did you see Vosenn?" He continued their private conversation, not leaning back. "That guy she's with has hated me for six years."

"Why's she with him then?" Enna wondered.

"I don't know," he said, laughing quietly. "But it's really weird."

"You only like him because he's the Boy-Who-Lived," Hermione commented disparagingly.

Everyone at the table went silent, horrified. Enna simply looked at Hermione with a puzzled expression on her face. "The what?"

She said it so honestly, that Hermione immediately looked embarrassed. "Never mind. Sorry."

"You're odd," Enna told her, getting to her feet and starting to walk away.

"Hey Enna," Harry called, and she glanced back to him. "Before I lose you to... that pack," he gestured to the Hufflepuff table. "I wanted to know if you would go to Hogsmeade with me Saturday."

“Sure,” she accepted, and then left with a little wave.

“You could have been a little nicer to her,” Ron suggested to Hermione.

Hermione looked sheepish. “I could have, couldn’t I?”

“Well...” Dean Thomas said with disappointment. “There’s still her friend.”

The next few days passed pretty much the same way, only Vosenn thawed toward him considerably, and even stopped to say hello once. Draco had been with her, and had appeared thoroughly confused.

Saturday came around and by noon everyone was excited about going to Hogsmeade, Harry decided to slip away early to find Enna. She was sitting in the Great Hall with Sariah, the room was mostly empty. Her hair was back in a long braid, tied at the end with a pale blue ribbon.

“You look beautiful,” he told her, and smiled to see Sariah. “Hello Sariah.”

Sariah smiled back warmly. “It’s good to see you Harry.” She winked at Enna. “I’ve got somebody to find,” she said, and then left them alone.

“I’ve missed you,” Enna told Harry. “This whole situation has been strange.”

Harry was glad to hear she’d been thinking about him too, then it wasn’t just him. “Shall we go?”

“Yes,” she said.

They took the walk to Hogsmeade slow, not talking much. Harry took her to Madam Rosmerta’s first, he ordered a butterbeer and she wanted a mocha-drink.

"Do you even know what mocha is?" Harry asked her.

"Not really," she admitted. "But if I can't pronounce it at first sight, it must be good, right?"

"Sure," he said, and sat in a corner booth. Instead of sitting in the booth across the table from him, she slid onto his lap, settling down comfortably and looking out to watch the people come into the bar and wait for their drinks. She draped one arm over his shoulders for balance.

Ron, Hermione and Ren came in some time later, spotting them in the corner but deciding to sit somewhere else. Their drinks came, and Harry paid for them. Enna was exactly the right height so that when she turned to take a sip, her cheek brushed his temple.

"We might as well have sat in the middle of the floor," Harry said sarcastically. There was something... ironic about the famous Harry Potter and the prettiest girl in school, people seemed compelled to look at them.

"Let's go then," Enna suggested and they left.

"Do you want a tour of Hogsmeade?" Harry asked her.

Her eyes brightened. "I have a better idea. Everyone is here, right?"

"Right."

"So that means nobody over third year is going to be at Hogwarts," she pointed out. "Let's go back, it'll be empty."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry nodded. "Are you sure you don't want to see any more of Hogsmeade?"

"Another time," she promised. "I'll come with you again."

"Alright then. Let's take a shortcut." Harry ducked between houses, Enna right behind him. Making sure no windows faced them and no one was watching, he ported back into his dormitory.

"Is this your room?" Enna asked, moving to the tower window. "Dark. I like it."

"Er... yeah, it's one place I knew would be empty for sure," Harry explained. He sat on the window sill and pulled her down into a hug.

She giggled and put one hand to the glass, as if she could reach out and touch the Hogwarts grounds.

Suddenly she turned her head and kissed him. It was sweet and intoxicating, when the kiss ended Harry was dizzy and sure he would fall right off the window seat.

"You taste like mocha," he told her. There seemed a long pause after that, as they simply sat and looked at each other, each thinking about the kiss, wondering whether to initiate another one. Finally she leaned in for another kiss, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck, then running them up through his hair. He pulled her closer to him, closing his eyes.

When he peeked again a moment later, he realized he'd ported them to his bed, nearly without realizing at all. The kiss deepened and he dropped his hand to her waist...

Author's Note: NAUGHTY. Yes, this does go further than either of them probably intend. That's why I end it here, that kind of thing isn't allowed on this site. Use your imagination.

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Sharing

Hearing footsteps, Harry frowned, looking at Enna with worry. "You should get dressed, I can port you away." It had been a couple hours, just about time for everyone to return from Hogsmeade.

She shook her head. "I'll stay."

"As much as I would like that, don't you think someone might notice?"

"Close the curtains, I can be quiet," she assured him, scooting down. Harry sighed and threw a blanket over her.

"Won't you be missed? Nobody saw you come back from Hogsmeade."

"I told Sariah that if I didn't come back she should cover for me," Enna said in a little voice from under the covers.

"... Really?" He asked, surprised. "Was this planned, then?"

"Not really," she said. "But maybe a little bit."

The voices outside grew loud and nearby, Harry tugged the curtains shut and slid under the covers. The door opened and his roommates came in, talking loudly to one another.

Harry pulled back the curtain, and they all greeted him.

"Hey Harry, you missed some fun today," Dean Thomas told him.

"I had better things to do," he said, and they snorted.

"Saw you and Enna in Madam Rosmerta's," Ron told him. "Getting close, aren't you?"

You have no idea, Harry thought and didn't respond.

"Goodnight then," everyone said as Harry let the bed curtain swing shut.

It was a recurring dream Harry had every night. It seemed to end every time he opened his eyes, and start where it left off right when he closed them. He'd been having it since he'd returned from Origin. More specifically, it had started when he put on the disguise amulet.

He was flying, always flying, relishing in the rush of adrenaline and the rhythmic beat of his own wings humming through his body. The landscape below him changed in an extremely improbable way, shifting from the grounds of Hogwarts to the Ayan Wilderness, then the deserts and so on, random patterns of land that shouldn't coexist on the same plane.

Something was different about the dream, a new level to it. Before it had been just the feel of the wind, the movement of flight, the sights below him. Beyond all that he now sensed a presence, a certainty that Enna was there somewhere, very close to him. Her presence felt right behind him, but every time he looked back she wasn't there. His perfect rhythm faltered as he spiraled, desperate to find her. He knew he would if he just looked hard enough.

The landscape had shifted again, and now he soared over an endless blue sea, waves like little ripples on the surface far below him. Then he noticed the beach; it was dead ahead and he was coming in fast.

A lone figure stood on the edge of the beach, the perfect yellow sun lighting up her hair like a halo. He immediately went to land next to her, completely throwing the dream in a new direction. Never before had he dreamed of other people, nor had he landed. To think of it, he didn't remember the ocean or any beaches either.

"Hello," Enna said dreamily, looking out of the water. "I must say I'm not surprised to find you here."

"Well I am!" Harry exclaimed, and she looked shocked, not so much about what he said than the fact that he was speaking to her at all. "I've never dreamt about you before."

"You haven't?" she asked. "How disappointing."

"Which brings us to... what are you doing on the beach?" he asked her.

"Oh I love the beach!" she said enthusiastically.

"No, I meant..." Harry sighed and gave up, she was beginning to fade. "I'm going to wake up... but you'll probably be here when I get back, right?"

"I hope so," she said honestly. "Harry, wait."

"What?" he asked, focusing on her form for just a few seconds longer.

She held up one hand, the ring and pinkie fingers tucked in, a gesture he was unfamiliar with.

What is it? He wondered. What does it mean?

Harry woke, and a peek through the bed curtains revealed that it was very, very, early morning. As in Gray-get-up-and-go-to-the-library early in the morning. Everyone but Gray, and now them, would be fast asleep. Enna blinked at him adorably.

"How many fingers?" was the first thing she said.

"What?" he asked, perplexed.

"How many fingers was I holding up?" she insisted.

"...Three," Harry said suddenly, realizing that's what she'd been doing in those last few seconds, holding up three fingers. "But... how... I was dreaming about flying?"

"And I was dreaming about the beach."

"You got in my dream!" Harry accused.

"No, you got in mine," she countered.

"It's beside the point, really," Harry said logically. "You need to go before anyone wakes up."

"Right," she finally agreed, gathering her clothes and stumbling off the bed, trying to put them on. Harry did as well, he was at least going to walk her to the door if not port her directly to her own bedroom.

"Harry?" Came a third voice, and they looked around to locate it. Ron wasn't in his bed, he was sitting on the windowsill, wide awake. As their whispering conversation had found its way out of Harry's bed and tripped across the floor at his feet, Ron looked at them in amazement.

"Harry. What's Enna doing here?" Ron asked very calmly.

"Sleeping." Harry said, completely serious.

"Sleeping? You expect me to believe that?" Ron said with a short.

"You won't tell anyone, right?" Harry asked.

"Of course not!" Ron looked insulted. "I'm your best mate, I'm going to spill your secrets." For a moment he was distracted; Enna was half naked still, getting dressed. "Oh, Merlin," he swore.

Enna blushed and tried to cover herself up, moving hurriedly. "Let's go," she mumbled, trying to hide her face in Harry's shoulder. Harry had initially felt okay about being discovered, after getting over the shock. It was only Ron, after all. But her embarrassment seemed to be contagious, because suddenly all he wanted was to get out of there. They left the room and Gryffindor tower, strolling through the halls of Hogwarts in the direction Enna indicated would lead them to the Hufflepuff common room.

"You seem to be doing really well here," Harry commented. "You have a lot of friends."

Enna shrugged. "I don't talk to them very much, they just like me for some reason. I've never really had friends before."

"Ren says people are drawn to Healers," Harry said. "But you're a nice person, of course they want to be your friend." After saying this, Harry felt a wave of pleasure.

I feel really happy... well of course I feel happy. Tonight has been amazing. "I have to say, you've been pretty different today," he admitted. "I'm kind of surprised..."

"All my life I've been under the strict supervision of my mother and her guards. I feel so liberated! Like I can do anything I want." Enna was practically glowing.

"So you don't regret what we just did?" Harry needed to know.

"No." She shook her head. "I wanted to be closer to you. You're very important to me."

"I'm happy too," he said and put his arm around her shoulders as they walked together. He left her at the Hufflepuff dormitories and went back to the Gryffindor Tower.

Ron is probably still up there. He must have been having trouble sleeping. Remembering his unease when in Ron's presence before, Harry decided to just stay in the Common Room. As he sat down in an armchair, the fire, which had been out, relit itself. Harry spotted stray forgotten books on the sofa next to him and sorted through them, reading the titles. "Another Perspective: Muggle Opinions of Magic," that sounds interesting. He settled down and started reading. He read in peace for a few minutes. Then he started to get the feeling someone was standing behind him, and turned to look over his shoulder. No one was there. Still, the feeling persisted, and he began to get annoyed.

"I wish I could go back to sleep."

It was a stray thought, strange, because he hadn't wanted to sleep. There was something different about it that made it stand out... a feminine quality, not something he usually associated his thoughts with.

“Strange.” He concluded, and went back to reading.

“... Harry?”

Startled, he dropped the book, loosing his page. “Huh?”

“Where are you?” The feminine thought asked.

“Gryffindor Tower,” he answered. “I must be more tired than I thought... hearing voices in my head. Worse, answering them!”

“It’s me, Enna.”

“... Well, what are YOU doing in my head?”

“I don’t know,” she said, sounding curious. “It’s odd, isn’t it? You’re definitely Harry, right?”

“I’m definitely Harry,” he agreed. “But then we must be having this conversation from completely different sides of the castle.” He thought that over, perplexed. “It’s not a Silent thing, is it? No pun intended.”

“I don’t think so,” she responded hesitantly.

Intrigued now, Harry put the book away and decided to see if Gray was in the Library. “Gray might know. I’ll go ask him.”

As Harry was walking toward the Library, the sense of not being alone followed him. It definitely felt like Enna, felt like she was next to him. He realized it was just the dream they had shared, he’d just known she was there, and then she was.

“You still there?” Harry checked.

“Yeah.”

“You can’t hear everything I’m thinking, right?” He directed at her.

"No," she confirmed. "I think you have to be trying... at first we were doing it by accident I think."

"That's good."

"Definitely."

Indeed, Gray was in the Library, sitting and leaning back. A thick tome rested on his lap, closed, but he was holding it so that his fingers were in between certain pages to keep his place. He was looking up and away thoughtfully.

"Good morning Gray," Harry said, pleased to see him.

"Hello Harry." Gray smiled. "What brings you here this time of morning?"

"I have a question," Harry said. "It's kind of weird."

"Ask anything."

"Enna and I can... hear each others thoughts," Harry explained awkwardly.

Gray drew his eyebrows together. "... Really?"

Harry nodded. "Have you heard of that happening, before?"

Gray closed his eyes to think, slowly shaking his head. "Maybe... I can't recall. Don't think I have."

Harry sighed, disappointed.

"Aunt Madalena would know," Gray said definitively. "Sometimes it seems she knows everything."

"Yeah, but she's in Origin."

Gray looked at him pointedly. "So?"

"Good point," Harry said. "It's important to me, I should pay her a visit. I don't have anything to be afraid of from the Queen anymore, she knows I'm needed here. Where do you think Madalena would be?"

"In her room, or her study, or with the Queen. I would check the study; she spends most of her time there."

"Where is it?" Harry asked.

"It's..." Gray frowned. "On the between level, kind of near the Queen, by the advisors."

"That's unhelpful," Harry said dejectedly.

"Sorry."

"It's alright..." Harry contemplated the problem. "Well when you were in trouble I found you by visualizing your face as I left the Void. I could probably port right to her."

"That would be the only way to do it," Gray agreed. "But you wouldn't be able to go to the Porting Point and fly in, you'd have to go directly to her."

"I've ported into the Pit before," Harry reminded him. "I can try to do it again."

"Sounds like a plan." Gray leaned back in his chair. "Let me know how it goes, will you?"

"Of course," Harry promised.

"Enna, Gray doesn't know." He projected to Enna.

"I heard."

"... you were listening?" Harry asked incredulously.

He could swear he heard Enna laughing. "It was like I could see through your eyes. It's kind of like before, when we weren't doing it on

purpose. It's almost like I'm being drawn into your mind. I promise I won't do it unless you invite me, I didn't know what I was doing this time, it just sort of happened."

He was surprised and definitely not amused, but he could feel her amusement as if it were his own. Some of my emotions tonight weren't even mine, he noted. I felt her embarrassment, and then her pleasure at my compliment.

"Then you know I'm going to visit Madalena. I'd recommend you don't pay any attention for a little while, I don't think you'd like the Void," Harry advised.

"Alright."

Her presence receded somewhat. Harry removed his amulet and swapped the Library for the Void, plunging through its icy depths for Origin. He let himself drift into the vision of the planet, picturing Madalena's face.

The world reformed around him, a long rectangular room with walls of bookshelves and many work tables. There were piles of rocks and crystals, the Silent magic conductor, littering the room. Madalena was seated at a desk with her back to him, leaning over something. His arrival must have been completely silent because she didn't react.

"Enna?" he called, wondering if she was still there. There was no answer. If he tried, he could still feel her, he could almost sense her emotions, but she couldn't hear him. It must be the Void, it muffles... whatever this is.

Madalena got to her feet, pushing her chair back. In her hands she was carrying a bowl precariously filled to capacity with liquid. As she turned to find him there, she started, and the bowl wobbled. She compensated, and nothing spilled. "HARRY!" she exclaimed.

"Aunt Madalena," he greeted her, with a small wave.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, crossing the room to a desk and carefully setting down the bowl. "You almost made me drop that, it's priceless."

"Sorry," he said. "I know I'm supposed to be on Earth, but I urgently needed to ask you something."

She sat in her chair and looked at him with curiosity. "Really? An urgent, burning question? How interesting. Do ask it."

Harry bit his lip. "Something happened. Enna and I are reading each others minds." He held his breath for her reaction.

Madalena started again, in a big way, bringing her hands up to cover her mouth. Unfortunately one of her hands had been resting on the desk, and with it she swept her bowl right off the table where it fell with a heavy thump and the 'priceless' liquid splattered the floor. She didn't even look down.

"Oh Harry," she exclaimed, sounding shocked and disappointed. "You didn't."

"What?" he asked nervously.

"The princess, Harry? The Queen would slaughter you." Madalena gave him a knowing look, and Harry felt himself turning red.

"Well..." was all he could say.

Madalena sighed, resting her head in her hands. "Just make sure Aeyris doesn't find out. Don't tell anyone, they might mention it to someone who knows what it means."

"What does it mean?" Harry asked.

"It's called mind-sharing," Madalena explained. "It's rare, which is why not many people have heard of it. A friend of mine specializes in it; she's been studying it for years. She would love to meet you, and I'd bring you to her ... if it were with anyone else, that is."

"So it only happens sometimes?" Harry clarified.

Madalena nodded. "There's another term, but it's inaccurate. The problem with the word 'soul-mates' is that it implies that there's only one person out there meant for you, whereas there are many that you may be compatible with. Mind-sharing means that you are not only compatible, but suited perfectly for each other."

"Wow," Harry said, thinking of the implications of that. "So does... it ever go away?"

"No, unless you break it," She told him.

"And how do you break it?"

Madalena raised an eyebrow at him. "If you cheated on her, of course."

"Ah. Of course." Feeling he'd learned what he'd come to learn, Harry decided it was time to go. "Thank you Aunt Madalena. I should probably return now."

"Have fun with that," Madalena said. Now over her shock, she looked highly amused. "Luckily it's controllable and you can keep each other out when you want to. I'm going to visit my friend sometime soon I think, and refresh my knowledge of the subject. If I learn anything interesting, I'll be sure to let you know. Goodbye Harry."

"... Wait." Harry said, realizing something. His gates, although not visible while he had the amulet on, were a cold metal reminder whenever he had it off. They had a certain meaning to him, like a brand of ownership to the Queen. "These are deactivated, but I want them off." He held up his arms.

Madalena nodded. "Of course." She crossed the room, nearly slipping on the spilled liquid on the floor. She gave it an annoyed glance. At the far wall she searched the shelves until she found the book she was looking for and returned to the desk. She dropped the book down, touching her casting stone reflexively, and the book opened to the right page.

"A colleague of mine makes them," She said absentmindedly as she read over the page. "Not my favorite invention, but extremely successful design..." She winced. "Grab a chair and pull it up here."

He took a chair from one of the worktables and sat across from her. Madalena gestured to the desk and Harry reached across it and rested his elbows on the edge. Madalena was still looking at her book with distaste.

"What is it?" Harry asked anxiously.

"This is going to hurt," she warned him.

She placed a hand over the gate on his right forearm, squinting in concentration. Her expression was so like Ren when she was casting difficult spells, Harry smiled at the resemblance.

A crack spread across the metal, directly through the symbols, splitting them in half. They flashed once, Harry recognized the appearance of a spell shutting down. Pain speared through his arm, and he yelped, trying to hold still. "What IS that?" He asked.

Madalena examined the broken gate, gripping a large shard as Harry gritted his teeth. "Like I said, successful design... you probably don't realize how powerful you are, Harry. The Cursed are near impervious to magic spells, they never stick. They went to extreme measures for the gates to work."

As she pulled on the shard, the pain intensified, and to his horror it pulled from his skin with resistance. On the underside of the metal, a neat point of crystal was speared directly into his flesh. She removed a few more pieces, and he saw that these crystals were spaced evenly down the inside of his forearm.

"Rocks and crystals are the best for holding our kind of magic," Madalena reminded him. "They deemed this necessary, but put spells on the gates themselves to keep you from feeling it."

The skin felt raw, and his arm was like an old, deep ache. "This is sick," Harry said vehemently.

"I agree," Madalena said solemnly. "There are certainly injustices in our society, there are those that are aware of it. Your arm will hurt a little less in a minute... when I do the next one."

"Just get them off," Harry said, and put his forehead to the table. He focused on what he could feel of Enna, reaching out to her. It calmed and distracted him.

When Madalena was finally done, and it felt like forever, she bandaged him up. "I'll dispose of that," she said, pointing to the cracked metal and crystal littering the desk.

"Thank you so much," Harry said, and she gave him a hug.

"James was my favorite brother," Madalena admitted. "Lexian liked to pester me, but James and I always got along. He and Lily were great together, they were both wonderful people. And you're so much like them. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you. Goodbye," Harry said and left. As he returned to the Library covered in frost, he dropped his amulet back around his neck and his wings left him. I really feel incomplete without them, so much so that I dream about nothing else.

"Well?" Gray asked.

"It worked," Harry told him. "I ported right into her study and back again."

"Congratulations," Gray said. "You officially defy the rules of the universe."

"Dark, isn't it?" Harry felt pleased with himself. "Anyway it's called mind-sharing, it happens when people are highly compatible."

"Does it?" Gray still looked confused. "I wonder why I haven't heard about it before."

"It's very rare," Harry assured him. "And you have to..." he hesitated.  
"Get very close."

Gray looked at him sharply. "Ah. I see."

"I'll see you in class, Gray." Harry said as he backed out of the Library.  
"Enjoy your book."

"Bye." Gray waved. "I will."

"I'm back," Harry told Enna.

"You got really distant for a while there," Enna said.

"Yeah, the Void gets in the way a bit." Harry reiterated his conversation with Madalena.

Enna was quiet for a little while. "It sounds like a good thing, then."

Reality was sinking in for Harry as well. "We're lucky we found each other."

Harry looked down at the bandages on his arms.

"I know you were trying to sleep, but could you come heal something for me?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "I'll be with you in a minute."

## Chapter Twenty-Four: Friendship and Lies

Harry hesitated as he reached the Gryffindor table for breakfast, looking to the Hufflepuff table where he knew Enna was.

"Do you want to sit with us?" he asked silently.

She turned in her seat to look over her shoulder and smiled at him. "I sat with you last time... this time you can come here."

"Oh." Harry looked skeptically at the crowded Hufflepuff table, then at the Gryffindors, who had noticed him standing right next to them and were making room for him already.

"Not today, sorry," he told them as he searched the table for Ron, they hadn't spoken since last night. Hermione wasn't to be seen either, and Harry did a quick inventory of the Great Hall, noting the absence of Vosenn, Ren, Sariah, Gray, Xaxx, and Miren.

"Where is everybody?" Harry inquired as he made his way over to the Hufflepuff table. Looking at him in surprise, several of Enna's admirers scooted over to make room. Harry dropped into the seat beside her.

"Haven't a clue," Enna replied. Harry gave her a brief kiss before enthusiastically greeting breakfast with his fork. Enna looked amused.

"Not even Sariah?" He asked skeptically.

Enna glanced away. "Ah. Well, I do know where she is. I'm just... returning a favor."

"What favor?" he asked with interest. He noticed several at the table leaning forward to them curiously, no doubt hoping to overhear some tasty gossip from their conversation. Harry appreciated their discreet mode of communication, it had its uses.

"Last night's favor," Enna looked at him pointedly.

Harry considered this carefully. “You’re covering for her so she can visit someone she likes?”

Enna nodded. “Don’t ask who, it’s a secret.”

Thinking woefully of Vosenn, Harry hoped it wouldn’t be too much of a surprise when he did find out. Again he looked at the Slytherin table, but the auburn-haired Slytherin and her boyfriend were still missing.

“I’m not surprised by the absence of Xaxx and Miren... not the most social two,” Harry frowned. “I hope Xaxx has stopped killing small animals. If not, I’ll have to have a talk with him.”

Enna didn’t respond to this, raising her eyebrows with alarm.

Ron, Hermione, and Ren didn’t show up until their first class of the day.

“Where were you at breakfast?” he asked, and they shrugged.

“Just came late,” Ron told him.

They took their seats and Harry looked closely at Ren’s face. She looked mildly concerned; Harry wondered if they were keeping something from him. Oh, don’t be paranoid Harry, he told himself.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to his arm. He flipped it over to show her. Enna had healed the puncture wounds neatly, but they’d been so long in the making that they had left pale, circular scars in a neat row on his inner arm.

“That’s what’s left over of my gates,” he told her.

“Oh,” she said. “Looks strange, you may want to hide it for now.” Then she looked at him speculatively. “When did you get off your gates?”

Harry could see he would have to explain, and leaned in to whisper in her ear, glancing around cautiously to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. They weren’t. He summarized the events of the

morning, omitting the details of his and Enna's relationship. Ren was interested by his visit to Madalena, listening closely.

"That's just wrong," she commented about the gates.

"Well. Queen Aeyris," he said, not needing to voice his opinion of the Queen and her methods.

"That's your girlfriend's mother," Ren pointed out with amusement.

"Yeah," Harry said dryly. "I noticed."

Harry felt eyes on him and looked up; Vosenn had showed up for the class they had together, and was watching Harry and Ren whisper. Harry raised an eyebrow, and she visibly sighed, getting to her feet and stealthily extricated herself from the Slytherin crowd, moving to the back of the classroom. Class hadn't started yet, and Harry followed.

There was a moment of awkwardness as they stood together. "How's Xaxx?" he asked.

The side of Vosenn's mouth curled up in a small smile, and she glanced around the room. "We had an interesting morning," she said.

"He isn't here," Harry noticed. "What do you mean by 'interesting'?"

"I came across him in the common room, in the process of being accused for one of the strange pet disappearances lately. He was clenching his fist and kind of growling... his accusers looked more than a little alarmed and took a couple steps backward. I walked up and told him to back off." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "He murmured something extremely rude, so I gave him a good slap in the face."

Harry couldn't help smiling. "In front of everyone in the Common Room?"

Vosenn nodded, pleased with herself.

"Because... that falls under the category of 'protecting' someone, am I right?" He asked with sarcasm.

She waved a hand dismissively. "He's safe from ice lizards. Just because I'm supposed to prevent him getting killed or abducted doesn't mean he can talk to me in that fashion."

They lapsed back into silence, though this time it was amiable.

"I like Hogwarts," she said. "A lot."

"Yes," Harry said vaguely, looking at her curiously. What's she about, then?

"I would see how someone would want to return to it," she said carefully, looking slightly haughty.

Harry just nodded. That's likely to be the closest thing to an apology I'm going to get, he decided. He smiled encouragingly. "So... what's all this with Draco?"

Vosenn shrugged. "He followed me around a bit until I acknowledged him. He's been very sweet to me." She looked over to the Gryffindor side of the room. "In case you haven't realized, being placed in Slytherin hasn't been easy for me. Nobody but the Slytherins has talked to me much. Draco was the nicest person to me since I got here."

'In case you haven't realized' was meant sarcastically. I hadn't noticed, Harry thought guiltily. It's true, Slytherins aren't very well received. I've probably changed how I act to her since her sorting placement, too. She must have been lonely, since the only one who knows the truth about her in her house is a sadistic Bloodbeast with homicidal tendencies. Maybe Draco has been truly nice to her. No wonder she didn't care what we said about him, she probably thought it was just the same prejudice everyone else has been exhibiting toward her.

Harry hesitated to tell her that it wasn't just prejudice that caused the rift between himself and her boyfriend. I'll tell her later, he decided.

Vosenn's face brightened, looking over Harry's shoulder as Draco entered the room. His eyes narrowed as he saw the two of them in the back, and moved to Vosenn's side possessively. Harry watched them, thoughtful.

Gray's metaphor, 'fire and ice' was probably the best description of the two he could come up with. Draco had always had a very dominating personality, one that overshadowed his friends and any girl he'd been with. Vosenn, however, matched that with her poise and self-possessed individuality. Her hair glinted red in the sunlight, and her dark eyes created contrast to Draco's pale coloring. She didn't have the beauty that Enna and Sariah shared, but she and Draco looked interesting together. Both of them had the same distance to the other students, as if they were somehow floating above everyone else. Draco believes he's better than everyone else, but Vosenn is just supremely confident and doesn't care what they think.

"Potter," Draco greeted coolly, looking back and forth between his rival and his girlfriend.

"We were just having a short conversation," Harry said, not feeling like dealing with Draco today.

"Well, don't." Draco said bluntly. Vosenn arched an eyebrow.

"I think she can decide who she wants to talk to on her own," Harry said. "Vosenn's a big girl."

Draco took a step toward Harry, pushing him in the chest. Draco faltered momentarily, he'd expected Harry to take a forced step back at this, but Harry didn't budge. He may as well have pushed the wall. Draco raised his hand angrily to do it again, but Vosenn reached out and grabbed it, stopping him in his tracks. Draco turned to her incredulously. Harry stepped back to watch.

"What?" Draco asked Vosenn.

"Don't," She said simply. It was clear from her tone that she expected him to obey.

Draco frowned, irritated. "Why?"

"Leave Harry alone," she stated clearly, forcefully, and turned to glide away. Draco looked from Harry to Vosenn, confused. He looked torn between following her or continuing his conversation with Harry and taking out some of his aggression.

Harry was tempted to taunt Draco about it, but that scene had been so perfect he just wanted to remember it, so he could laugh about it later. He still expected Draco to come and try to intimidate him some more, and was quite surprised when Draco went to follow Vosenn. Interesting, he thought.

After his adventures in the early morning, Harry was drowsy come evening and gratefully fell into his bed, falling into a comfortable sleep.

Immediately he was flying, soaring high above the shifting landscape, fast enough that the ground was indistinguishable other than blurry shapes. He didn't know how long he was flying for, time wasn't relevant in his dreams. What seemed like quite a while later, Enna suddenly appeared midair. She flew in her distinctive way, wings moving quickly in a hover. Harry slowed, trying to mimic this feat but having a hard time doing so.

They were still in the air, yet the ground still moved as if they were in flight, momentarily taking the form of the City in Origin, and then of Hogsmeade. Enna peered down at it, intrigued.

"Interesting," she murmured.

Harry spiraled momentarily, and then continued soaring ahead, slower this time. Enna followed and caught up to fly with him.

Then suddenly he was awake, and sat up abruptly in his bed. He glanced around, hearing the light snores of his dorm-mates. He was restless, and his back was itchy, it wasn't the first time he'd had trouble sleeping. With a sigh of resignation he moved to the window,

looking out over the grounds of Hogwarts. It was a beautiful, clear night. Flying in his dreams was one thing, doing it in actuality was something else entirely.

If only I were stupid, then I wouldn't see what a bad idea that is, Harry thought ruefully. I could be seen, I wouldn't be under the protection of the amulet. I'm supposed to be in hiding. He was feeling more irritable as the itching persisted, completely out of his reach. No one would be in the Forbidden Forest at this time of night, Harry thought. He peered out to the still forest, and then back to his bed, where nothing but restless tossing, turning and itching awaited him. Making a decision, he returned to his bed, pulling the curtains shut and pulling the blanket up and over his head. Completely hidden from view, nobody noticed when the blanket was suddenly empty, least of all the sleeping Gryffindors.

In the trees of the Forbidden forest, in a spot obscured from anybody looking out from the castle, Harry was pleased with himself. Nobody saw me leave, and nobody is the wiser that I'm out in the forest, he told himself, satisfied.

Removing his amulet, he dropped it into the little pouch he kept for storing it and the tension of his back was relieved as his wings were free to stretch in full glory. He leapt up into the air, enjoying the feeling, and headed upward. In the tips of the trees he comfortably wove back and forth, not rising above the forest but comfortably hidden from those below as well. It was dark and the forest was silent.

Harry continued his weaving pattern through the trees, moving back into the forest and then circling around and back, content. A sudden scream pierced the air, not far from him. Alarmed, Harry headed for the scream, carefully peering downward. Seeing movement below, he perched on a tree branch and pulled close to the trunk, confident that his black wings curving around him hid him completely from view in the darkness. Sure enough there were people in the Forest below him, and Harry immediately recognized the blond head as Draco Malfoy. Looking at the others, he realized that they were none other than Ron, Hermione, and Ren. Shocked, Harry barely even flinch as something threw itself out of the darkness, knocking Hermione to the ground. It had been her scream, Harry thought he might even have

recognized it immediately but had suppressed the thought as not possible. Harry faltered on his branch, trying to identify the dark shape.

A blast of light and it flew off Hermione. Ron was advancing with wand outstretched, on what revealed itself to be an Acromantula, a fair sized one. Ron seemed to have the situation under control.

That is, until another Acromantula got him from the back, and suddenly Ren was struggling with one as well. She blasted it away with her casting stone, but another immediately took its place. Acromantulas poured into the clearing from all sides, clearly anticipating a midnight snack.

WHAT ARE THEY DOING OUT HERE THIS TIME OF NIGHT? Harry wondered urgently. Without another thought he dropped off his branch and descended. Ron seemed to be in the worst trouble, the enormous spider had started wrapping him in silver web, as he yelled and jerked, struggling to no avail. Swooping from above, Harry clipped it and it went flying off his friend, rolling into the bushes. The other Acromantulas immediately took notice, the one holding Draco even let go to advance on this new threat, a difficult enterprise because the threat was out of reach over his head. Surprising Harry, it took a giant leap to the tree next to him, nearly grabbing him in the process. Alright, not so out of reach, he thought worriedly.

Draco took one glance at the shadowy shape flying above, turned and ran. Harry snorted with disgust at Draco's cowardice, and freed Ren next, knowing she'd be able to help him. Ren had recognized him immediately, widening her eyes with surprise, but turned to the matter at hand, blasting Ron and Hermione free. The majority of the spiders went after Harry, leaving only a few to guard the fresh meat, something the three young wizards seemed capable of handling.

One of the leaping spiders finally got lucky as he watched his friends distractedly, and took him along to the next tree, slamming him into it. Harry punched it in the belly, right through the membranous skin and into the jelly-like innards. It howled and fell, and Harry shook his slimy hand in disgust. Preferring the advantage of the air, Harry leaped out from the tree, knowing he was completely surrounded. It would be no

great feat to fly up and out of the trees, out of the spiders' reach, but he couldn't leave his friends, nor could he steal them from this many spider monsters.

I'm going to have to reduce their numbers, Harry thought decisively. Whirling into action, he attacked. Beneath him he heard a yelp, as it started raining dead spiders in the Forbidden Forest. He glanced down, seeing Ren pull Ron and Hermione to shelter under a massive broken tree branch, angled from the truck in a kind of lean-to.

His heart beat with the rhythm and exhilaration of flight and fight. The Acromantulas were attempting to converge on him with overwhelming numbers and pull him to the ground. The trees were writhing with spider legs, and for a second he could see the scope of the situation, a canyon of vicious bodies below him. He had to twist in midair to fight them off, making good use of his razor sharp wing tips to slice them to pieces. He dealt with any who got past this defense with ready fists. The forest floor was littered with mushy spider guts and bits of leg. Every move Harry made was natural and instinctive. He hummed with power. A glowing warmth spread through his limbs, the spiders blurring before his eyes.

A shrill keening cry brought the Acromantulas up short. Backing up, the remaining monsters fled into the forest in retreat. Deprived of what had been the center of his focus a moment earlier, Harry floated down to the ground, dazed. Three pairs of wide eyes were watching him from the wooden shelter, Ren stepped out into the open but Ron and Hermione didn't move. They stared at him with shocked, accusing eyes.

"... Harry?" Hermione said faintly.

Harry saw them flinch as he spun away, swiftly escaping into the night. Ren will get them back safe now.

His insides were burning, he didn't know whether it was from getting riled up by the fight, or if it was the humiliation from the look on his friends' faces. Maybe both. The burning intensified and Harry changed direction midair. The trees stopped and he was out in the

open for a few short seconds. Angling his wings down, he dove into the lake.

The shock of cold momentarily reminded him briefly of the Void, but cold water couldn't compare to the dead, icy Void. He exhaled, letting the rest of the bubbles leave his mouth and float away, breathless. His momentum was taking his deeper, and the heat abated, cold water calming him and bringing him to his senses.

What have I done? He wondered. Saved my friends' lives, that's what... but at what price?

His feathers were slicked down, and he flew onward as if he were in the sky above, wings a working substitute for flippers. He sliced through the water, circling before finding the bottom of the lake, and drifting down to rest, closing his eyes.

"That was quite a rude awakening," someone whispered softly in his head.

"... sorry," Harry apologized.

"It's alright," Enna said gently. "What's happened?"

"I woke up and decided to go flying. I ported to the forest, and then I heard a scream. I found Ron, Hermione, Ren and Draco in the Forbidden Forest, about to becoming Acromantula food. That's a spider monster, they get the size of a bus... er, a small cottage." He tried to think of a comparison she would understand. "So I rescued them, and Ron and Hermione saw me. Draco ran away, but I was out in the open already... I don't know what he saw."

"Hold on, I'm coming," Enna said and was silent. He tried to forget that night, the weight of the lake pressing him down. For a few minutes his mind drifted in the currents like a fallen leaf, crumbling apart.

Harry felt a small tug at him, and recognized Enna. In his relaxed state he acquiesced unthinkingly, and surfaced in a strange place, blinking, to find himself standing just outside the walls of Hogwarts.

He was striding forward, limbs not his own. Enna. I'm looking through her eyes.

He immediately saw what she'd wanted to show him, standing before him were Vosenn, Gray, Jon and Sariah, mostly in their nightclothes, bed-head all around. They peered at Enna with sleepy eyes, matching her urgent pace.

"What are you doing here?" Vosenn asked.

"Same thing you are," Enna said. "How did you know to come? Harry called me."

Vosenn pulled her disguise amulet out of her dressing robe. "Madalena put an extra spell on our amulets that attunes us to Harry. If he's in danger of going over the edge we're alerted."

Jon squinted, looking into the distance in front of them. "Hide," he ordered.

They stepped behind the bushes, kneeling down. Draco, lacking night vision, hadn't spotted them. He sprinted by, stumbling up the steps to Hogwarts. Vosenn frowned at this, but readily turned away to continue toward the forest. There were more important things for her to deal with right now.

As they passed the lake Enna glanced toward it, knowing Harry was in there. She didn't say anything to the others. On the edge of the forest, they encountered the trio of night-wanderers, a different combination than usual: Ron, Hermione and Ren.

"What happened?" Vosenn asked without delay.

Ren pushed her hair out of her face, frazzled. "We were attacked by massive spiders."

"Who was attacked?" Jon asked.

"Ron, Hermione, Draco and I," Ren responded.

Vosenn narrowed her eyes. “What, exactly, were you doing in the forest?”

“Draco challenged Ron to a wizard’s duel,” Hermione explained, but she sounded distant, not quite present at that moment.

Harry felt a stab of betrayal. “I didn’t know anything about this,” he told Enna.

“And Harry came?” Jon asked.

“No,” Ron said, shaking his head. “It was something I had to do on my own.”

“Meaning,” Hermione translated, “That Draco dared Ron to come by himself, taunted him, betting he couldn’t do anything without Harry.”

“I was there,” Ren said. “We were walking to the Great Hall for breakfast, and we came across Draco, he was waiting for you Vosenn, I think. They got into an argument, and then Draco challenged Ron to a duel. I wanted to tell Harry right away, but Ron insisted that I didn’t.”

Harry remembered her concerned expression that morning. Sounds like something Ron would do, to conserve his pride.

“But then the Acromantulas came out of nowhere,” Hermione said. “Harry—“ She stopped abruptly, stock still, looking at the crowd in front of her. “Jon? Enna? Who are you people?” She’d never met Gray, Sariah or Vosenn, and their appearance and the combination of them standing together struck her as odd.

“Harry flew out of the sky and slaughtered them,” Ron exclaimed, finishing. He didn’t notice Hermione’s expression. He appeared to be completely hysterical. “Flew! With wings!”

“He’s a Silent,” Hermione identified with certainty. She looked at Ren suspiciously. “You’re Harry’s cousin...” she let the end of that sentence trail away. You must be one too.

Ron understood what Hermione was insinuating. "Right!"

Hermione, a step ahead as usual, was taking full grasp of the situation. "I've seen you all before... you're all Silents, we saw you in the City! You were with..." She looked up to the sky. "The dark one, with the blindfold. It was Harry, wasn't it?!"

"People just don't see what they don't expect to find," Harry commented to Enna silently. "It was all there in front of them, the whole time, but they didn't recognize me as a Silent on Origin; they don't recognize the Silents on Earth, until they saw me with wings and the rest of them standing together."

Vosenn sighed with exasperation. "We don't have time for this right now. We need to find Harry. We need to find him right now."

"The... dark ones," Hermione said, searching for a good term, "Our guide said they're 'mentally unstable'."

"Violence or intimidation can send them into a berserker rage," Gray confirmed. "That's why we need to find him."

"Berserker rage?" Ron repeated, face blank.

Harry detached himself from the silt on the bottom of the lake, heading up.

On the shore, the Hand was removing their amulets, dropping them to the ground and flexing their emerged wings, preparing for a search of the forest. Ron and Hermione stepped back and watched, stunned. Enna removed hers as well, she'd been feeling as cramped as the others with the loss of her own wings. If everyone else got to take the amulets off, then she was going to do it as well.

Ron tilted his head in recognition. "You're the princess."

Enna smiled and nodded.

The surface of the lake beside them exploded, and a dark figure leaped up out of its depths and landed gracefully, drenched and

dripping water. Harry stood silently for a second, looking around with intense eyes, then pushed his hair back and flapped his wings lightly to get some of the water off.

"I'm fine," he said stiffly. "I'm cooled down."

"Yes, we can see," Ren told him somewhat sarcastically, but it wasn't very believable. She was smiling, pleased to see him.

The Hand breathed a collective sigh of relief. Harry was looking down, but also glancing at Ron and Hermione from the corner of his eye. They've been my best friends from the beginning. What would I do without them? What WILL I do without them, that is? They can't possibly still consider me a friend after hiding the truth from them. Not after finding out I'm from a different world, a difference species... and the 'mentally unstable' part.

Vosenn was turning bright red, Harry watched her, fascinated. She's angry, I think. She's bursting to say something, but won't because she thinks I might still go over the edge.

"Harry," Vosenn said in a reined in, measured voice. "You took your amulet off and went flying in the forest?"

"Only this one time," he said.

"And you realize," she continued, "That taking the amulet off nullifies the protection of the amulet, and that doing so is extremely reckless?"

"Er," Harry said, uneasy at the look in her eyes.

Vosenn closed her eyes tightly shut, as if in pain. "Why."

Harry faltered in his response, because it didn't seem like a question the way she said it.

"You don't seem to have respect for anything," Vosenn said in the same dead tone. "You desert us in the Pit, which endangered lives already, and then come here and do this, even though you claim to love Hogwarts? You don't seem to care much for the students' safety.

Or the people you're supposed to be protecting, if you're seen the ice lizards would hear about it."

Harry gritted his teeth, humiliated and angry. He could feel Ron and Hermione's' eyes on him. They pierced his soul.

"Stop!" Enna stepped forward between Vosenn and Harry. "Stop it Vosenn!"

Vosenn lifted her eyebrows incredulously.

"Leave him alone," Enna insisted. Everyone looked impressed.

Even Vosenn was shocked into silence, though Harry realized after a moment that she was just lost in thought. She was looking at Enna very closely. "It was you. The Healer that helped Harry escape... we never found her. You did it."

No one can accuse Vosenn of not being bright, Harry thought.

Drawing back her shoulders in defiance, Enna announced, "Yes." She seemed to be gaining momentum, confidence. "It was me."

Vosenn lost it, pulling at her hair. "Argh! This is hopeless. How are we supposed to do our job when the Queen's daughter herself is set against us?!"

"I'm not set against you, I'm just with Harry," Enna protested. "The world doesn't revolve around you."

"Yeah, but you surely think it revolves around you, if you think that you can do whatever you want!" Vosenn snapped.

"Leave her alone," Ren ordered, stepping forward. "I helped too."

Everyone looked to Ren. Ren set her jaw and made clenched her hands into fists, tense.

Before anything more could be said, Gray added in a loud voice. "As did I."

The shock at the revelation that Enna had helped Harry was dwarfed by this declaration. Jon, Vosenn and Sariah stared at him unblinkingly with dismay, Ren and Enna looked impressed. Ron and Hermione looked confused, but intrigued all the same. It was clear that the Hand considered this the ultimate betrayal.

"You?" Jon repeated. "You helped him escape? Why?"

Gray smiled calmly. "He's my cousin."

"Really?!" Sariah asked, looking back and forth between Harry and Gray. "I see it," she said finally, meaning the resemblance.

Harry was proud of his cousins and Enna for standing up for him, but was becoming weary of the drama. He strode past them, stopping face to face with Ron and Hermione. He opened his wings slightly, arching them around himself.

"This is who I am," Harry stated. "I wanted to tell you. I should have, I owed it to you... but I was afraid of things changing. I've only known since summer, myself."

Harry tried to read their expressions. Both of them looked tired, concerned, upset.

"That must have been a surprise," Hermione said quietly.

"It was," Harry said with a small smile.

"I need to go..." Hermione looked away, to the castle. "I need to think about this." Before walking away, she reached out and gripped his hand momentarily, squeezing it. As Ron and Hermione left, Ron looked back at them once as if trying to cement the sight into his memory.

Vosenn had been strangely quiet. Her face was partially obscured with a curtain of hair. "Put your amulets back on," she told the group, and they complied. They waited expectantly, feeling that she had something else to say.

"I don't know what you think of me, if you hate me or not," Vosenn said. "I've tried my best, I really have, but when my own people and the people I'm trying to protect don't care, then why should I even try? I was given a task to perform, but it's impossible. I've always been so sure of everything in my life... I knew I wanted to work for the Queen, I knew I was going to make this Hand work, because it's what I do. As long as you give it your all everything will fall into place." She laughed bitterly. "At least that's what I thought." She left.

Enna stepped up next to Harry and took his hand.

"It's been a hard night," she thought gently. Harry dropped his head to her shoulder dejectedly. "It's going to be alright Harry. See? Look."

He looked over his shoulder at her prompting. Sariah had stepped up to Gray and they were talking in undertones. They stood very close; Sariah had her hand on his shoulder. She still looked a little hurt, but was listening to his soothing voice with acceptance.

"That's who you were covering for?" Harry asked, and Enna nodded. "That's why Sariah and Gray weren't at breakfast either, while the encounter between Ron and Draco was taking place."

Jon glanced at Harry and then slowly followed Vosenn, who was now only a small dark shape near the castle. Ren was looking at them with amusement, speaking when Jon was out of hearshot. "You two really can hear each other's thoughts... you look like you're having a conversation, even looking over your shoulder together, but you're not saying anything." She bit her lip, serious now. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about what was going down tonight Harry. I knew I should, but Ron seemed to really need me not to. I went along; I thought if you weren't there at least I could help if something went wrong."

Harry sighed. "It's okay Ren. I'm not mad."

The three of them started back towards Hogwarts together, leaving Sariah and Gray to themselves.

"This isn't going to be the end of this," Ren said, stating the obvious. "But I overall I think Ron and Hermione took it pretty well. If Draco did see something, no one would believe him. And Vosenn will get over it."

"If you think so." Harry wasn't quite so sure.

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Willowy

The next two days were two of the hardest days of Harry's life. That's how long it was before Ron or Hermione talked to him again. At that point, Harry was wondering just how long Hermione 'needed to think'. He'd been eating at the Hufflepuff table to give them some space, and gone to the library in the afternoons. Now that the secret was out about Gray and Harry's relation, the three cousins spent lots of time together. There was deep rift between the members of the Hand, Vosenn appeared to have sunk into depression and barely left the dungeons, Draco hovering over her with concern. Draco had looked relieved to see the three Gryffindors the next morning, Ron, Hermione and Ren, all alive and well. Jon was distant, Sariah stuck to Gray like a burr. Xaxx, Miren, and the twins were clueless of the current state of things.

Harry hadn't expected Ron and Hermione to approach him on the lawn outside Hogwarts, but they did. He was sitting with Ren, waiting for Enna, Gray and Sariah.

Ron and Hermione dropped down to sit on the other side of Ren, and spoke to her first.

"Do you have wings too?" Hermione asked. "You're Harry's cousin, aren't you?"

Ren shook her head, not looking offended. "I'm half, like Harry. Sometimes you look full Silent, like Harry and Gray. And sometimes you're left in between." She shrugged. "It's not bad. I still have all the advantages of being a Silent, just not the wings."

"You could still fly," Ron pointed out. "We have brooms."

Ren considered this carefully. She looked about to refuse, as she had every time someone suggested using a broom so far. But this was the first time Ron and Hermione had approached them since 'the incident', and she didn't want to ruin the moment. "Maybe I will," she said.

Hermione leaned forward to look around her at Harry. "I can't help myself, I'm madly curious about how this came about. I want to know

everything!" Her excitement must have been somewhat contagious because Ron was looking fascinated as well. "What's it like, the place where the Silents come from? How did your father come to Hogwarts? Why are your cousins and those other Silents here now?"

Harry was glad just to hear their voices. Enna, Gray and Sariah walked up just then, surprised to see Ron and Hermione.

"They want to hear about Origin and my family," he told them in a level voice, but they knew how much it meant to him.

"Of course!" Sariah sat down, pulling Gray to sit next to her. They all clustered in a circle. "I love stories."

Harry wanted to tell them everything, and the full story took half the evening, because Hermione kept asking questions as they went along, about the specifics of casting-stone magic and Origin Mythology. They took turns talking, explaining different bits and pieces until it all came together.

"So now we're all in hiding," Harry concluded. The only part he left out, of course, was his connection with Enna. His cousins were the only ones to know about that, though Harry was pretty sure Sariah knew. Enna or Gray would probably have mentioned it.

Somewhere in the middle, Jon had wandered by, seeing all of his friends sitting together happily. Without hesitation Harry waved him over, and Jon joined them, reluctantly at first but then he got into the spirit of it and talked a mile a minute, joking around, his usual self. "I was angry the other night," he told them. "I see Vosenn's point. The Hand is falling apart... I didn't want that to happen." He added sheepishly, "And Vosenn is kind of scary sometimes."

Hermione was looking thoughtful, staring directly at Harry. "So what are you going to do about Voldemort?" She asked bluntly.

Sariah frowned. "What's that?"

"It's a who," Ron told her explaining the state of the Wizarding world to those who didn't know about the Dark Lord. Gray and Ren knew

about him already, of course, Voldemort had killed their uncle. They couldn't tell them about Voldemort without going over all of Harry's encounters with him. The reiteration of Voldemort's rise to power and sudden fall gave Harry some time, a delay in which he could think. When they were done, Hermione watched him expectantly.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I've thought about it... things have been distracting."

"Look at what you can do," Hermione pointed out. "You're strong, you can... 'port', you're practically guaranteed to win."

"If I knew where he was," Harry pointed out. "And he did kill my father, remember? What makes you so sure I won't be killed too?"

"Well, you weren't before," she reasoned. "Maybe because you were a Portal Guide." No one had used the term 'Cursed' in front of Ron and Hermione, out of respect for Harry. He appreciated it.

"I don't know where he is," Harry repeated. I'm not AVOIDING the issue; I just don't know what I should do. If I were face to face to Voldemort, would I kill him? How?

"You found Gray and Madalena through the Void, even when you didn't know where they were," she said.

Harry smiled at that. "Yes, well... I think an important part of that is that I wanted to find them. I don't think that under any circumstances I will honestly want to bring myself to Voldemort."

"But if you knew where he was?"

Harry nodded. "If I knew where he was, and if the people I'm protecting are safe, I would go to him. If going through all of this was worth anything, getting rid of Voldemort would be worth it." He thought painfully of everyone who'd already been lost to Voldemort. His parents, Sirius...

"You'll tell Dumbledore, then?" Hermione prompted. "Dumbledore should know, right?"

Harry looked over their faces. The Silents were looking alarmed. “I don’t think so, Hermione. Right now, I need to make sure the ice lizards don’t find us, I promised I would.” That isn’t all of it... I don’t want to leave Hogwarts, and I can’t imagine Dumbledore accepting all of this and letting us stay. I’m devoted enough them by now that if they leave, I would probably go with them. And I don’t want to leave; I’m not ready to leave yet.

“Well if we don’t explain, then we can’t expect to just walk up to Dumbledore and ask him where we can find Voldemort,” Hermione said.

“That would be convenient, wouldn’t it?” Harry replied. “Dumbledore would have the best guess as to where he is, but he’d also never tell us.”

“I’ll look into it,” Hermione said with determination. “Harry has your link to Voldemort been active?”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll let you know if anything happens.”

Enna nudged him. “What about Luminae?”

“... Luminae?” He repeated thoughtfully.

Enna nodded. “If she knew, she would tell us.”

“Voldemort is a world away from her,” Harry said. “It might be a bit of a stretch to expect her to know about him.”

“She could always ask her Goddess,” Enna persisted.

“It might be worth a try,” Harry agreed.

Ren sighed loudly and rolled her eyes theatrically. Now that she had everyone attention, she looked them over skeptically and said, “Must I point out the obvious?” as if it were painful for her to do so.

“... well, yes.” Gray said. “Get on with it.”

Clearly enjoying herself, Ren said dramatically, “Harry... you don’t need to look for Voldemort.” She paused, continuing in a normal voice. “If I understand correctly, Voldemort’s been trying to find you for years. It would be harder for him to find you, than for you to find him. Just go wander around somewhere where he would be too tempted to not kidnap you.”

“... Right.” Hermione agreed. “That’s true.”

“We should probably think it through,” Harry said. “We’ll meet and talk about it again and see if we have any good ideas, alright?”

Everyone nodded, and went their separate ways.

Hermione seems to be overjoyed because she can learn so much about Origin from us, Harry thought. Ron... Ron was there, but I don’t know if he was all there. He was kind of reserved... I don’t really know how he’s feeling right now.

The next day Harry walked through Hogwarts on his own, he really wanted to see the twins. Miren and Xaxx could take care of themselves, but not having spoken to them— well, Shetha, Thamn never talked to him— weighed uneasily on his mind. He knew they spent a lot of their free time in the Greenhouses, but there were quite a few of those. After going through all of them and finding them empty, Harry was going to give up, until he heard the faint murmuring of familiar voices. He went around behind the Greenhouses, to find the two of them seated in the tall grasses.

“Hello,” he greeted them as he sat next to them.

“Harry,” Shetha said, pleased, and to Harry’s surprise, Thamn smiled. “I haven’t seen you in ages!”

“Sorry,” Harry apologized, feeling guilty. “How has Hogwarts been? Have you missed your home terribly much?”

They nodded together. "We've missed it a lot," Shetha verbalized. "But Hogwarts its fun... we can stay up as late as we want!" She said gleefully. "And we made a good friend."

"Oh?" Harry asked with interest. "Who's that? Neville?"

Shetha looked at him blankly. "Neville? No, but he is nice."

"Who, then?"

Shetha motioned for him to follow and scampered off, Thamn at her heels. Amused, Harry jogged to catch up. Their hair was a medium brown, straight and fluffy, bobbing around their heads as they trotted across the Hogwarts grounds.

"There!" Shetha said triumphantly, pointing.

Harry looked from the twins' smiling faces to where they pointed, and then back to them again. "What?"

"Our friend," Shetha said, "Right there."

"... but that's the Whomping Willow," Harry protested. Ignoring him Shetha ran forward. "I don't think that's a good idea—" he stopped abruptly.

To his surprise, the Whomping Willow extended one massive branch and delicately plucked Shetha up in the air, brought her to its trunk and cradled her to it. Shetha grinned and hugged it back, comfortably seated on a branch. Thamn followed closely behind as usual.

"The Whomping Willow?" Harry repeated, stunned. No way.

"You've met Willowy?" Shetha asked happily.

"Willowy?" Harry shook his head. "It doesn't like me very much."

"Nonsense," Shetha said confidently. "Willowy is a sweet and gentle tree, he likes everyone."

Harry took a deep breath, and refrained from re-educating her. Only Shetha... seriously... "No, I'm really sure he doesn't like me," Harry insisted, and to demonstrate, took a step forward. Immediately a branch whipped around, but stopped a foot from him.

"See? He says hello," Shetha told him.

The branch moved cautiously forward, and Harry was subjected to the strangest 'hello' he'd ever experienced. The branch prodded at him, touching his face and shoulders. Abruptly, although to Harry not unexpectedly, it swiftly punched him in the stomach.

"OOF!" Harry said painfully, backing up. Appeased, the branch retreated.

Shetha just looked perplexed. "That's strange. He's our best friend. We play catch and everything!"

"What kind of catch?" Harry asked suspiciously. "Like catch with a ball?"

"How is that fun?" Shetha asked. "No, like this." She got to her feet and ran along the branch like a squirrel, feet bare under her robes, and then bounced carefully. The branch promptly launched her in the air. Harry took a step forward, wanting to strip his amulet and fly to the rescue, but on the other side another branch caught her gently, absorbing the impact. Shetha squealed, and Harry felt like rubbing his temples in exasperation.

"It can throw us into the Lake from here!" Shetha added. "Don't you want to play?"

"Oh, no thank you," Harry said, with a shudder. Most definitely not. I think if I tried that... fun little game... I'd end up embedded in the side of the castle. Not today, thanks. "You have fun."

## Chapter Twenty-Six: Sneak Attack

Ren was looking at Harry, Ron and Ginny reproachfully, as if they were closing in on her, and at the broom Ginny offered her as if they intended to hit her with it.

“You did promise,” Ron reminded her gleefully.

“Restrain yourself, Ron,” Ginny told him. “You can’t make her do anything she doesn’t want to.”

Ren looked at Harry, who didn’t hold in a small, amused smile. Ren finally accepted the broom from Ginny, and hesitantly imitated the way the others climbed onto their brooms. Harry stayed with her as the other two demonstrated how to kick off the ground properly.

“You don’t have to go very high,” Harry told Ren. “After you kick off just sit back a little, and you’ll hover. Then we can do a slow circle of the pitch.”

Ren looked around the empty Quidditch Pitch. Enna and Hermione were comfortably seated on the lowest benches, and they waved enthusiastically.

Ren looked unconvinced. “You’re not all making Enna fly,” she pointed out.

Instead of owning up to the obvious injustice, Harry surged ahead, and Ren followed, wobbling uncomfortably for a few seconds until she found her balance.

“Turn and lean forward,” Harry instructed, gliding ahead in the air. The broom felt awkward in his hands, but he didn’t let it show. Ren was growing confidence, trailing behind, and then finally pulling up next to him. She scowled. Harry sped up, daring her to keep up the pace. After a couple more rounds she broke off their circular path and flew up to surprise Ron and Ginny, displaying immediate talent in her broom handling. Ren was looking a little over-pleased with herself so Harry bumped into her and she shrieked, turning around to bump him back. Laughing, Harry pretended to be falling off, then simply flipped over and flew around her upside down.

"Show off," she muttered.

"I'm proud of you," Harry told his cousin. "You were so stubborn about not flying, what was that all about?"

Ren looked thoughtful. She twisted her hands from a light grip to a firm, possessive grasp. "I've spent so much time thinking of myself as handicapped... for years and years Harry. You don't understand what it's like, people look down on you but expect you to be 'used to it' and always be inferior. Flying... just wasn't for me."

"You love to fly, though, we knew that already. Every time you flew with me, you had so much fun."

"It was just a mental block," Ren admitted. "I couldn't wrap my head around the idea of flying by myself."

Harry swayed on his broom, closing his eyes to a sharp stab of pain at the front of his skull. Ren reached out and gripped his arm, steadyng him. "Land," she ordered. They went straight to the ground. Ron, Ginny and Hermione didn't seem to have noticed, but Harry could feel Enna's eyes on him.

"What was that?" Enna asked.

The feeling was gone as fast as it came. "Dunno."

"Scar?" Ren asked, and Harry started to nod, and then shrugged.

"Yes," he decided, "But different, somehow." He headed for Enna, who smiled warmly at him, taking his hand as he sat next to each her. He gestured for Ren to continue, and she practiced her flying a while longer, getting some pointers from the two Weasleys.

Ron grinned slyly at Harry and Enna, and Harry remembered that Ron had caught them in the boys' dormitory together, and looked away immediately. Enna caught the same look and blushed.

That night in Gryffindor Tower, Ron spoke to Harry quietly, “I keep forgetting that she’s not just that pretty Hufflepuff girl, that she’s a princess...”

“Yeah, it took some getting used to. And you haven’t met her mother, either.” Harry winced.

“You really don’t get along with her, do you?”

“Well...” Harry told him, “She threw me into a dungeon, separated me from my family, drove spikes into my arms, and make me fight another—“ He almost accidentally said ‘Cursed’— “Portal Guide.”

“So she doesn’t approve, then?” Ron said.

“Definitely not,” Harry confirmed. “She would... I’d rather not think about what she would do, actually.”

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, then immediately flopped over backward, eyes rolling back he was hit by another spike of pain, this time worse than before, and thrown into a vision.

Voldemort’s dark, slender silhouette was cast in shadow on a stone wall. A wizard stood with him, but seemed to standing back, as far from the Dark Lord as possible. The wizard was holding up a lighted wand for Voldemort to see by, and was brightly illuminated. It was Lucius Malfoy, his eyes nearly closed to shield against the glare. In the dark corner, something was crying, whimpering, and Voldemort stood over a large, clear bowl filled with fresh red blood.

“Lucius, have your wife feed that,” Voldemort ordered.

“I don’t think there’s anything in the kitchen for—“

“Anything will do,” Voldemort said sharply.

Harry opened his eyes, recoiling as if the scene were right in front of him. Ron was leaning over him, and jumped when Harry suddenly moved.

"Enna, I think I just saw Voldemort. I think he was doing some kind of blood sacrifice, or ritual..."

Enna didn't respond. "Enna?" he asked again, with the same result.

Ron was trying to talk to him, but Harry couldn't hear it, though he could see Ron's mouth moving.

"ENNA!"

Harry's blood was boiling with anger. Voldemort's hateful face and the whimpering of the poor thing he'd taken blood from was imprinted in his mind, and Enna's soothing presence was nowhere to be found. His amulet felt hot and he grabbed it to look at it closer.

It's hot because it's working overtime, Harry realized, Calm down, Harry. He remembered something else. It's probably calling the Hand. They might even be coming in here... I should leave the dormitories. He pulled on Ron's sleeve, and walked out of the room, Ron following cluelessly.

"I had a vision," Harry finally told Ron. "Let's find somewhere we can meet with the others. Tell someone to get Hermione and Ren."

He wasn't paying much attention while a female Gryffindor went into the girls' dormitory for them, but suddenly Hermione was there, looking slightly irritated. When she saw the look on Harry's face, she looked concerned. Ren was right behind her.

"I think I triggered the amulets," Harry told them.

They four of them left the Tower and looked for an empty room, finding on a large storage closet and settling down to wait. Within the next few minutes the rest of the Hand showed up, looking confused as they stepped through the door to find themselves in a closet. Harry immediately reassured them. Soon he was surrounded by Vosenn, Jon, Gray, Ron, Hermione and Ren, and Sariah got there last, bringing Enna with her. Enna looked slightly dazed.

"Sorry I'm late," Sariah told them. "Enna passed out."

"I'm fine now," Enna said.

"What happened, Harry?" Vosenn asked.

Eyes lingering on Enna, making sure she really was okay, Harry said, "I had a vision about Voldemort. I think I know where he is." He briefly described the vision. Enna passing out must have been a result.

"Draco's father?" Vosenn asked, sounding confused.

"Yes, it sounded like they were at Draco's house," Harry said, and everyone nodded in agreement.

"What now?" Ren asked.

"Well I don't know how long he's going to be there, I only know he's there right now." Harry pointed out. "Which means if I want to go after him, this would be the time to do it. The only question left is whether it's a good idea or not."

They contemplated in silence for a minute.

"It's up to you, Harry," Gray finally said. "There are enough of us to take care of things on this end, if you want to go after him."

"I don't think there's any danger of you getting hurt," Ren agreed.

"You could just sneak in and take him out," Ron said excitedly.

Harry nodded, taking a deep breath. "Okay. I think I should do it. I hope that seeing a room in a vision is the same as seeing it while awake to port there. That way I can port right into Draco's house."

Vosenn looked a little like she'd eaten something that didn't agree with her.

"It shouldn't be hard," Sariah mused, "He is just a human wizard."

"Are we sure of that?" Enna asked anxiously.

The storage closet got quiet.

"I'm going," Harry said finally, having reached the decision. "Well, that's that," he said, and prepared to port out.

"Hold it," Vosenn said. "I'm coming along. And..." she looked over the group, "Gray, you too."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

"You honestly think we could let you run around somewhere by yourself?" Vosenn demanded.

Gray and Vosenn moved in to stand next to him, and Harry took them both by the elbow. Closing his eyes, he pictured the dark room, as much as he had seen of it, and brought them abruptly to it. The process was much easier when he didn't have to travel in between worlds and traverse the Void.

As Harry had suspected, the vision had been happening in real-time. Little time had passed. Lucius was gone but Voldemort was standing in the exact same spot, his back to them, wand lit over the bowl of blood. He must have heard a small noise, because he growled, "Took you long enough," as if he had been expecting someone. His voice alone grated on Harry's nerves.

Harry reached up, removing his amulet and casually handing it to Vosenn. On either side of him the others took theirs off as well. Harry moved forward pulling his wings up menacingly, a dark shape. Voldemort turned to look and his blank face contorted momentarily in confusion and anger.

"What's this?!" Voldemort demanded.

Harry's only response was a low growl, before he lunged in for the kill. This Bastard really had it coming to him. He deserves to be torn apart.

SMASH!

Harry thought for a second he heard the bones in his face crack as he was stopped up short, his lunge bringing him into contact with a hard, impenetrable surface. A surface that couldn't be seen, a wall that wasn't there.

No matter, Harry thought. His spells can't keep me out. He closed his eyes and ported himself beyond the wall. Opening them, he found himself in the exact same spot, and tried again, only it just wasn't working, the feeling of displacement never came.

Harry froze, incredulous. What on Earth is going on here? NOTHING can stop me. I have ported through the block in the Pit, and they say that was placed by Dark Eyes himself. What is so special about Voldemort that he can put up a shield like this?

The shielding was one sided, because in the next second Harry was assaulted by spell after spell from Voldemort's wand, vicious dark magic that seemed to claw at him. The spells slid off, as if he was well-oiled and they were mere water drops.

Harry unfroze, bashing at the wall in frustration, shaking off curses. Faintly, Harry heard Voldemort laughing, and submerged in a pool of anger, drifting away. Harry blinked a couple times, and the storage closet came into focus.

"Harry?" Enna asked gently.

Ren and Sariah, both sitting next to him, didn't react to his presence, and he realized he wasn't there at all, that he had left his body behind and was now looking through Enna's eyes.

"Yeah, I'm here," he responded.

Ron and Hermione were sitting a few feet away, talking.

"Think about it," Ron said. "We're waiting in a storage closet, while Harry is making a sneak attack on Voldemort. If someone had told me this is where I would be a week ago, and I would have thought they were mad."

Hermione nodded. "On top of that, he's from another world."

"Can't forget that," Ron agreed.

"How strange," Harry commented silently. "One second I'm fighting spells, and the next I'm back here."

"How's it going?" Enna asked.

"Not very well," he answered grimly. "He put up a shield. I can't attack him or port through the shield."

"But you're fighting spells?"

"He's trying to curse me, but it's not sticking. Last thing I remember, I was trying to smash through the shield..."

"Last thing you remember?" She prompted.

"Next second I was here. I've probably... you know... gone over the deep end."

"Harry," Enna said, "Isn't letting your body run free attacking things kind of irresponsible of you?"

"Irresponsible?" Harry repeated.

"Yes. Irresponsible."

"Alright," he agreed, and left the storage closet behind.

Returning to himself, he found his suspicions were correct and he had gone completely berserk in the meantime. Harry snarled and clawed at the barrier, throwing his whole body against it and trying to break though it. Harry tried to calm himself. He took some deep breaths, but felt stuck in quicksand, barely able to move and affect his own body. Something caught his eye, and he turned his head to get a better look at it.

Behind Voldemort, two ice lizards stepped through a portal Harry hadn't noticed, their claws scraping harshly on the stone floor. Their turned their icy little eyes on Harry, emotionless and unaffected. Voldemort dropped the futile assault on Harry, and glanced at him shortly, one last time, before stepping through the portal. The portal shut.

The second Voldemort was gone the shield dissipated, and Harry fell forward.

CALM DOWN, HARRY! He told himself. He belatedly realized that he was lying flat on his back, and someone was standing over him. A slight pressure was holding him down, firmly. Gray was holding his casting stone in his hand, working magic. Vosenn kneeled down to take a closer look at Harry's face, hair swinging forward to conceal her expression.

"Harry?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Just give me a minute." He closed his eyes, trying to let go of his frustration. "I don't think he recognized me," he said.

"Harry, you're my cousin and I barely recognized you," Gray told him.

Harry's eyes snapped open as he remembered something. "Let me up," he said, and Gray let him go. With his great dark-vision, he scanned the corners of the room and located a limp form. Moving to the corner, he kneeled beside it. Harry pulled out his casting stone and lit it up with a quick thought to get a better look.

It was a Centaur Filly. She was still alive, but very weak, and Harry could see where Voldemort had drawn her blood. Her eyes fluttered open slightly as Harry gathered her up in his arms, and he brought her over to the others.

"How terrible," Vosenn said softly.

"Is it an Earth Centaur, or an Originian Centaur?" Harry asked.

"Originian," Gray replied.

Harry carefully handed the Filly to his cousin. "I'm bringing her home."

He opened a portal as fast as possible. The Void was just a flash before he returned for the Filly. Gray and Vosenn were right behind him as they stepped onto the soft grass of another world, into the dusk of Origin. He closed the portal. In front of them was the meeting hill of the Centaur Elders.

"You think they're in a meeting right now?" Vosenn asked.

"If we're lucky," Harry said.

They were. After treading quietly through the tunnel into the hill, they entered the meeting room and found four Centaurs, not the Elders in their entirety, but enough. Harry stepped forward with the Filly, and he heard a gasp. He looked around quickly but he didn't see the Centaurs he knew, Enilor or Eniladas.

"What have you done?" A pale colored Centaur demanded. The Elders were all shocked, horrified, seeing the blood.

"I had nothing to do with this," Harry explained quickly. "I found her held captive by an enemy of mine and I'm bringing her home."

"Don't listen to him, he's Touched," someone said.

"He's telling the truth," Vosenn said firmly.

"What's been done to her?" The first Centaurs asked.

"A dark wizard took her blood. He had it in a bowl, and he was looking into it. I don't know any more than that," Harry told them regretfully.

"Well thank you," the Centaur said, stepping forward to take her from Harry. Harry was about to say 'you're welcome' when the Centaur added, "If you are merely rescuing her, as you claim."

They weren't inclined to trust him. Gray met his eyes, and shrugged.

Another portal and they were back in Hogwarts. The rapidly changing surroundings disoriented Harry for a moment. He was weary of trying to cope with all the changes in his life, frustrated with the failure of his attack and just wanted to sleep. He could ponder the mysterious connections of Voldemort and the ice lizards tomorrow.

Everyone got to their feet, eager to hear what had happened. Harry filled them in briefly and then stalked off to go to bed, leaving them to discuss it by themselves.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Lockdown

Harry slept like the dead. He missed the first couple classes of the day, finding consolation in the oblivion of dreamless sleep. Everyone let him be. When he finally got up later, he was clearly distracted and if anyone talked to him at all, he looked at them sullenly and gave short answers.

In the afternoon he wandered into the Library, where Hermione and Gray sat at the table, reading. They weren't close friends but between them they had a quiet, understanding companionship. Harry sat and enjoyed the calm for a few minutes.

Gray frowned, putting his book down to the table. "I just can't figure out the blood ritual. What was he trying to accomplish? And why did he need a Centaur Filly?" He shook his head. "I've gone through all my books, and the library doesn't seem to have anything either."

"I could have told you that you wouldn't find anything on blood rituals in here," Hermione commented. "That's too Dark for the student library."

"That's only one of many unanswerable questions," Harry said sullenly. "What connection does Voldemort have with Origin? Did he send the Ice Lizards? We just don't know."

Gray sighed. "Sorry Harry, wish I could be of more help."

Someone ran into the Library, coming to a skidding stop.

"Shh!" Hermione said sternly to the small second year, who was trying to catch his breath. He looked scared and terribly excited, all at the same time.

"The teachers are rounding everyone up," he called to the readers and browsers of the Library. "The whole school is being put on lockdown. No one is allowed to leave, and they're making sure every single student is in the Great Hall. Snape will be here any minute, you should probably head for the Great Hall unless if you don't want him to snap at you."

Gray, Hermione and Harry exchanged perplexed glances.

"A lockdown?" Hermione said curiously. "What for, I wonder?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at her. "Any word from Hogwarts, A History?"

"It's happened twice before," she confirmed. "Once was an unsuccessful dark wizard attack, another time it was a prank that went wrong and made all the teachers hallucinate."

"What did they hallucinate about?" Harry wondered.

"They thought the school was being attacked by giant fungus," she said with a small smile. "Both were over a hundred years ago," she added. "It doesn't happen often."

Footsteps echoed in the hall outside, through the door the second year had left wide open. They realized everyone else had cleared out and hurriedly got to their feet. Harry helped Gray and Hermione collect their books.

Professor Snape appeared in the doorway. "No time for that," he ordered. "Leave the books where they are, come back another time to clean them up. Now MOVE."

They dropped their books and brushed past him. He went into the Library, presumably to make sure that it was really and truly empty.

"Suppose it's not a drill then," Harry noted.

Everyone converging at the Great Hall, at once, from all directions, created a massive slow-down at the door, where they stood packed together for minutes before squeezing through.

"Take your seats, students, take your seats," Dumbledore was saying loudly.

Harry sat down at the Gryffindor table, and looked around for any evident reason or explanation for the lockdown, but he couldn't see

through the crowd. Ren sat next to him, and smiled slightly. The professors entered just then, confirming that every student was present, and shut the doors with a very final sounding thud, locking it securely. People were finally settling, and Harry could see that the front table was occupied, although the professors were all standing. In their seats was a company of uniformed men, stoic looking fighters in dark red.

The students all looked spooked, and it took a while for their anxious murmuring to die down as the Headmaster tried to get their attention.

"Thank you all for your swift response," Dumbledore said, to professors and students alike. "I'm hoping it will be just a false alarm, but until proven as such the lockdown will be in place and no one can depart the Great Hall." He looked at the front table. "Gentlemen, perhaps you would explain."

Two men stood up, and Harry got a better look at their uniforms. They were dark red with an even darker toned diamond pattern, and unlike the others, these two had gold sashes over each shoulder. To Harry's alarm, they appeared to be carrying not only wands, but long sabers at their belts. Their boots had wicked looking spikes.

The room was dead silent, and Harry silently commented to Enna, "This looks serious."

"Who are they?" she asked. Harry could see the back of her silky blond hair at the Hufflepuff table.

"Not a clue," he said regretfully.

Of the two men, the older one was tall and slim, refined looking with silver hair mixed into black. The other reminded Harry of a Viking barbarian. He was shorter but wider and very muscular; he appeared to be nearly bursting out of his uniform. He had long scraggly brown dreadlocks. His mouth was slightly open, displaying his bad dental hygiene. Standing next to each other, the contrast made the first man look even more arrogant and the second look even cruder.

The silver-haired one spoke. "I am Captain Augustus," he announced. "This is Captain Rak Darvan, and we're the captains of the Control." He spoke haughtily, almost lazily. "We have a little bit of a situation that must be dealt with." Meanwhile, the other man stood just a little bit behind him, glowering.

"The Control," Augustus continued, "Are the agents of the Otherworld Control Center."

Harry's breath caught in his lungs for a second. OTHERWORLD CONTROL CENTER

"We've found information that suggests that there are Otherworld Fugitives in their room, and we won't be leaving until every single one of them is in custody." Augustus paused. "For your safety, of course."

"Excuse me Captain Augustus," Professor McGonagall said loudly. "If I may ask, how did you discover the presence of these Otherworld Fugitives?" She seemed very tense.

"We've recorded the opening and closing of a high number of unapproved portals in the area, and our spells have alerted us to their presence of Otherworlders."

Harry's heart sank. Then it's entirely my fault... if I'd known I was setting off alarms, I would never have ported so much. Now we're found. He gripped the edge of the bench he was sitting on tightly. So much for flying under the radar, I hope this hasn't caught the Ice Lizards' attention.

"Captain," Dumbledore said, sounding regretfully. "I hoped to not draw attention to this, but we are indeed lending protection to a few children from Origin. They are not fugitives; they were targets who needed a secure place to hide. Everything is under control."

Captain Augustus looked at Dumbledore with disgust. "You allow animals into your school?" he demanded.

Uh-oh, Harry thought.

"Animals?" Dumbledore repeated. "No, human children."

Captain Augustus smirked. Harry hated him. "I fear you have been tricked, old man. If they were human, they wouldn't be setting off our spells. They must be non-human in disguise. Bloodbeasts and Centaurs, or the like."

Dumbledore glanced quickly over the students.

"How many of these non-humans are at our school?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Captain Augustus frowned, saying, "It's difficult to determine the exact number, but we will know when we have them all. We have full ministry approval to remove them from the school."

"What do you propose to do?" the Headmaster asked, looking slightly worried.

Worried ABOUT the Originians, or FOR us? Harry wondered.

Captain Augustus strode over next to the table, where no one stood. He took a large silver ring off his finger, tapped it with his wand, murmured a spell to it, and threw it to the floor. As it bounced to a stop, it expended, stretching. The end result was a thin silver hoop, large enough for many people to stand inside the border.

"Here's how it works," Rak Darvan said in a loud gravely voice, which sounded exactly what you would think it would sound like by his appearance. "This silver here, it cuts off signals to our detection spells. When all Otherworlders here are inside of it, we will know. The border will also contain them." He lowered his protruding brow to look glaringly over the students. The front row appeared to be trembling in unison. "Now either these Fugitives will step forward and enter the ring themselves, and we will be done and gone sooner instead of later, or we will have to check the students, one by one. It will take longer that way, but we will find you in the end. There is no way out."

"Captains!" Dumbledore said with anger. "I will not have you threatening my students! Either you act civilly, or I must ask you to leave!"

"Calm yourself, Headmaster," Augustus said in his smooth, oily voice. "Everything is under control." He gestured with his hands, and the control-men seated at the table got to their feet and fanned out in the room.

"Oh, Dark Eyes!" Enna thought fearfully. Harry wanted to say something reassuring, but couldn't think of anything to say.

Augustus reached into a black velvet pouch and pulled out a sealed glass tube, setting it on the table. Suspended on the inside of the smooth glass floated an ink black feather, glowing with a slightly blue silhouette.

"What is that, Captain?" Severus Snape asked curtly, from somewhere in the back of the room.

"Portal Guide feather," Augustus said, looking pleased with him. "Most important ingredient for the detection spell—if you ever do any magic that has to do with portals or other worlds, they're essential. They're just so damn expensive." He pointed to the feather. "When that feather is glowing, we are in the presence of non-human Otherworlders. As soon as they've all surrendered, it will stop glowing. If none of them surrender, each person in the room will have to hold it in turn to see how it reacts." He cast suspicious glance to the room at large.

Everyone in the room looked about themselves distrustfully, at all the people around them, which conveniently hid the moment Harry and the others glanced back at Vosenn. She looked fierce, and determined. After a couple seconds she got confidently to her feet and walked between the tables, right up to the Captains, shoulders back.

Draco got to his feet. "Vosenn!" He called after her, shocked. She looked back at him and shrugged regretfully. Someone pulled him back into his seat.

Harry felt a surge of admiration for Vosenn as she faced the Control Captains fearlessly. “I’m from Origin,” she announced. “My people have done nothing wrong. We are here by Dumbledore’s consent, and we don’t mean any harm.”

“That’s for us to decide,” Captain Augustus said, looking smug.

“You must understand,” Vosenn insisted. “We’re in hiding, and your actions may have already alerted those who wish to find and kill us. We only want to be left alone.”

Instead of responding, Captain Rak Darvan grabbed her by the shoulders and thrust her into the silver ring.

“HEY!” Vosenn exclaimed, hand reaching into her pocket. Harry tensed, but Ren grabbed his hand tightly, giving him a look that said, STAY PUT.

We may not set off the feather spell, Harry realized. We’re half human, after all. But what about the others? Enna, the twins... He bit the inside of his lip, tormented.

Vosenn withdrew her hand (with which she’d been about to throw some noxious potion, Harry was sure) and felt the silver line for the invisible wall the captains claimed was there. Finding it, she realized throwing her potion would be futile.

Vosenn looked at them sharply. “You big brutes!” She narrowed her eyes at Captain Rak Darvan, “Are you from Origin?”

He looked slightly taken aback. “I am. The Control needed someone who knows things about my homeland.” Realizing Captain Augustus was glaring at him and he should have kept his mouth shut, Rak Darvan added, “Why?” brusquely.

Vosenn smiled. “You look like you’ve got a bit of Bloodbeast in you.”

Rak Darvan took a step back, offended. Augustus shook his head in anger. “Be silent,” he ordered, and turned back to the room. “Well?” he asked expectantly.

Vosenn looked across the room to the Ravenclaw table. “Miren,” she said clearly.

She’s probably making sure that the ones we’re protecting get in first so that the Hand isn’t trapped without them, Harry realized.

Miren got to his feet, coming forward to join her in the silver circle. The Captains let him walk by unmolested.

“Shetha, Thamn, Sariah... Enna,” Vosenn added regretfully, looking sad. The four stepped quietly forward, Harry could hear gasps. Dawning looks of realization crossed the Hogwarts students’ faces. People were beginning to remember that these people were new, they hadn’t been there last year. At The Gryffindor table there was a different reaction: half the Gryffindors stared at Harry.

Yes, my girlfriend isn’t human, Harry thought, and looked at Ron and Hermione. Their eyes were wide, scared. They’re afraid for me.

“Xaxx.”

Xaxx stood up from the Slytherin table, and glowered at every one. No one there looked surprised.

Vosenn breathed a visible sigh of relief when he was in the circle. She’d been most worried about Xaxx, worried that he would make a scene. If they all cooperated, the Hogwarts students wouldn’t get involved, but if he fought, someone could be injured.

“Jon.”

Jon quietly left the Gryffindor table to join the others.

“That’s everyone,” Vosenn told the Control. Clearly she’d had the same notion as Ren.

"Confirm that," Rak Darvan said.

A Control-man carefully inspected the feather. It was kind of hard to tell whether it was still glowing or not, the glowing having dimmed slightly with each person entering the ring.

How ironic, Harry thought. A feather, just like the ones I have.

"We're good!" the man said.

"It's still glowing slightly," Augustus said sharply.

"Close enough, right?" Rak Darvan asked.

Augustus shook his head. He looked at the eight people in the silver circle and at Vosenn. "That's not everybody," he said decisively. "Tell the rest of them to reveal themselves."

Vosenn glared at him. "They're only half-blood."

"We'll sort everything out back at the Otherworld Control Center," Augustus repeated, "We aren't taking any chances."

He really does think he's doing the right thing, Harry thought bitterly, Even if he's cruel about it. He's destroying everything... it's not fair.

Gray got to his feet of his own accord, and joined them.

There was silence as everyone waited. Under the table, Ren was squeezing Harry's hand tightly. Slowly she withdrew it, getting to her feet. There was a moment of confusion— Ren hadn't showed up when the others had. She was there before them, and after all, she was Harry's cousin.

"Your cousin is only half human?" Dean Thomas shot over the table, eyes wide.

After Ren was in the circle, the Control checked their feather again. It was still glowing, but just the smallest, tiniest bit.

"There's another one, isn't there?" Augustus demanded. Vosenn shook her head firmly. "If we don't have everyone," he said loudly. "We're going to have to go through and check every single person."

Harry looked over his shoulder at Dumbledore. Dumbledore was looking about quizzically, wondering who the last person could possibly be, since all the new students were revealed already. He glanced at Harry, as if wondering if Harry knew.

Harry sighed, prying his fingers away from the bench. Feeling like he couldn't breathe, he very slowly straightened, getting to his feet. Looking straight at Dean, he said, "Yes, she's half human. Only, I'm related to her through the non-human side."

It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. No one moved. After Harry had taken five steps, Professor McGonagall spoke up.

"Harry Potter! He has to be human," She protested. "We'd know if he wasn't human." She looked at him carefully. "Harry?" she pleaded.

Harry shook his head slightly, walking forward. People started murmuring to each other in shocked voices.

"Step inside so we can check the spell," Augustus said.

"Harry, don't," Ren said. "We can't afford you getting stuck in this thing."

"Don't you get it?" Vosenn asked her. "He has to, so they leave everyone else alone. If we hadn't come here, the Control never would have come to Hogwarts and harassed everyone. Let's leave with dignity."

Harry toed the line, feeling its pull. It didn't have the same strength as Madalena's, or even Voldemort's magical barriers. I'm pretty sure this can't hold me, he decided. He stepped inside the silver circle, and the feather stopped glowing.

"You can open the doors and start getting the rest of the students out," Augustus told Dumbledore. Nobody moved. The professors were all staring at Harry, incredulous.

Something flashed on the edge of Harry's vision. He immediately snapped his head over in reaction. Sariah, who was standing next to him, jumped in surprise, but nobody else turned to look as he did. Whatever it was, they hadn't noticed, and he now saw nothing there. Harry began to turn away when he noticed the thin translucent thread that marked a portal in that same spot. Nobody else could see the portal open... how was it established without its creator coming through?

He thought he saw the thread quiver, and his blood froze. This can't be good. Maybe our enemies kept an eye on the Control, hoping to let the Control do the work for them. If so, then we are in big trouble. And it's entirely my fault... again.

"Watch out!" Harry yelled, pointing at the portal, invisible to everyone but him. The Control-men looked perplexed and didn't respond fast enough.

Moving snakelike, the distinctive silver-blue bodies of ice lizards slid into the room. Without a pause they fell upon the nearest Control-men, opening their alligator mouths to sink their teeth into human flesh, moving to claim their prize. Screaming, the students ran back, climbing over tables to get out of the way, but doors were still locked. All about the room, Control-men pulled out their wands in one hand, and the sabers in the other, running to fight the monsters off. Rak Darvan immediately ran into the fray, but Augustus backed away, right next to the containment circle.

Harry reached out to touch the magic restraining wall just ahead of him. It was invisible, but it hummed with power. Without a second thought Harry ported beyond it. Whatever special attribute Voldemort's shield had been gifted with wasn't present in the silver ring, because he had no difficulty.

He grabbed the nearest Ice Lizard and flung it to the ground hard, snapping its neck, and for extra measure crushed its skull with the

heel of his boot. The rest wouldn't go down as easy, they immediately identified him as a threat and moved defensively. Three lizards circled him, dropping down low to the ground on their bellies, barely targets. Behind them, the other Ice Lizards were free to wreck havoc. People were shouting questions, and not getting any answers.

Harry's next move was to tear the amulet from his neck, throwing it aside carelessly. He ignored gasps of astonishment as his wings burst from him in one smooth movement, and he crouched, aware of the Ice Lizards around him on all sides. He immediately took advantage of the air, leaping out of their reach and staying there, searching for the fastest way to pick the next one off. He dropped on one unexpectedly, heard cracking from its ribs, but a violent spasm almost knocked Harry off. Simultaneously, the other two were on his back. He focused exclusively on his target and wrapped his arms around it, squeezing, encouraged by the feeling of the bones cracking beneath his hands, waiting until the monster was completely limp.

Harry yelled out in pain—something was trying to tear his ear off, the skin on his back was under assault by razor sharp claws; his clothes were rapidly shredding. He tensed with anger, and then exploded into motion.

For a few seconds he had a double vision of sorts. He could see through his eyes, and almost be watching himself, simultaneously, and was sure by now he was more in Enna's mind than his own, because he could hear voices loudly nearby.

He blinked and looked around through Enna's eyes, in the silver ring cage. His friends were either completely untransformed, or in the last stages or reverting to their natural states. Some were watching anxiously from the sidelines as Harry, in his primal state, whirled among the giant slashing lizards. Others stood next to Augustus demanding to be set free.

"He needs our help! For Dark Eyes' sake, you have to let us out!" Vosenn shrieked at him.

"You probably had something to do with this!" Augustus returned angrily. "Be silent! I have more important matters to deal with."

"You don't know what you're up against!" she insisted.

"I can't just let you go!" he yelled. "You're prisoners."

"Let us out right now," Gray argued, "You can't handle the ice lizards, and you most certainly cannot handle Harry."

Augustus looked understandably overwhelmed, yelling out to his men so somehow get control of the situation. The teachers had backed the students up against the wall as far away as possible. None were hurt, and the lockdown was being undone. Still, it would be a while before all the students were safely evacuated.

Enna glanced quickly at Harry, or rather Harry's body. As she watched he literally bit deep into an ice lizard's neck and ripped its throat out. Enna stopped watching.

"I know it's not really you," she told him sadly, "But it hurts to watch, just the same."

"I'll always do everything I can to protect you," Harry tried to soothe her.

"I understand it's your job, and my mother told you to protect us, but it doesn't seem fair that you have to go through all of this."

"I'll be fine." The few seconds he'd seen of the fight had made it fairly clear that he was fighting with no plan, no awareness of what was going on around him. The other ice lizards might not even have existed. "I have to somehow get back into this, and get control somehow. This is how I can win."

Bringing himself back was like climbing up a water slide, there wasn't anything to grip onto, and every time he thought he was making some headway, he slid right back to where he started. Double points of view, incoherent voices and pain all smearing together around him, he didn't know which way was up.

"There's one behind you Harry, turn, quick!" Enna cried, "Oh no!"

Taking control of himself, he spun around and caught the lizard midair, but the momentum slammed him into the ground. More piled on, bodies coming from all sides.

"Now they're all on you!" She told him.

"Really?" he repeated, "All of them?"

"Yes!"

He waited a second for more teeth and claws to sink in and grab hold, then took action, bringing them all into the Void. They hung breathless, ice cold. For a few seconds Harry felt deep terror as he realized that their bodies were frozen into place around him, and the weight was pulling him down into the Void where he would fall... forever. Scared out of his mind, he grappled for the way back, loosing a few dead lizards along the way, and slammed back into the hard floor of the Great Hall. Struggling to his feet, Harry ripped the Ice Lizards from his skin and clothes and threw them to the ground, where they shattered into a million pieces.

There was a shocked silence as everyone stopped to look. The sound of little ice pieces tinkling across the floor continued for several seconds. Then somebody whooped in victory, Harry thought it might be Jon.

SLAM!

Before he had time to take another breath he was thrown violently back against the floor. Are there more? Did more come through the portal? What if they never stop?

Harry rolled over on his opponent, and his opponent flipped right over back on him, punching him for good measure. This isn't right, Ice Lizards don't PUNCH... they bite and claw. He finally focused on his attacker enough to recognize who it was: Xaxx.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: Betrayal

Harry managed to hurl the Bloodbeast off and back up a couple feet, crouched. Xaxx, fully untransformed, claws wet with blood— Harry's blood— gnashed his teeth, eyes blazing with animalistic fury as he stood to face him. They froze, each waiting for the other to make a move.

The roar became individualized voices:

“What is he doing?!”

“Xaxx, you Bloodbeast bastard!”

“Rip his head off, Harry!”

“No! Don’t! He’s the Chief-King’s son, remember?”

“Who cares?! He’s trying to kill him!”

Xaxx growled something, and Harry frowned, unable to hear. The room became silent in anticipation, and behind Xaxx, the Hand was pressed up against the barrier, watching anxiously.

In a low rasping voice meant for Harry’s ears only, Xaxx repeated, “I said... now you die.”

“What are you doing?” Harry said quietly back. “We’re trying to protect you.”

“Do I look like I need protection?” Xaxx growled. “From YOU?” He shook his head slowly. “Now, you will die in front of your friends, for what you did to me.” His eyes flashed to the claw around Harry’s neck.

“That, still?” Harry asked in exasperation.

“You don’t realize what you’ve done. I’m to be Chief-King, now... and yet I have no respect from my father, no respect from my own kind. I won’t have it, until I’ve fought you and won.”

"You're despicable," Harry spit at him. "I'm fighting for their lives, and you attack me? I have to get them to safety." Harry was feeling slightly panicked—he was wounded, and worn out. They had been unmatched before, but Xaxx was angrier than Harry had ever seen him. Harry felt shredded.

"I don't care about them," Xaxx said vehemently, and clawed at Harry's face.

Harry grabbed Xaxx's arm but Xaxx lunged in, momentum carrying them both backward, nearly toppling them over.

Don't let him knock you down, Harry thought to himself. And don't let him get his claws into you.

That moment he was in danger of both happening, and as Xaxx was leaning into him Harry grabbed him back, unfurled his wings and left the ground, both of them lifting up into the air. Harry flapped powerfully, stirring the air in the large room and bringing them higher and higher. Soon they were near the ceiling, Xaxx thrashing him. Harry let go and tried to push him away, disentangling himself and kicking at his opponent until Xaxx was forced to let go. The Bloodbeast plummeted, landing far below with a sickening crack. Single-mindedly, he got to his feet and snarled up. Harry swooped down. Xaxx reached to grab at him, but encountered razor-sharp feathers, slicing deep into his hands. He howled.

Xaxx lurched, almost falling, but without warning went for Harry again, singeing his fangs deep into Harry's shoulder. Harry tried to throw him off, but this only succeeded in tearing deeper into his shoulder. He curved his wings around himself to jab at Xaxx, raking across the left side of Xaxx's face, leaving long bloody trails. One feather sunk into Xaxx's eye, and stuck there.

Xaxx unclenched his jaw and leaped away, shaking his head, but the feather was firmly lodged. With an earsplitting scream of fury, he sprinted away.

The students were being evacuated through the doors now, and the people in the doorway of the outside exit fell back as Xaxx ran toward them, pushing past. He disappeared, fleeing.

Harry watched him go, and then quickly checked for any new threats, but there were none. With a deep sigh, he sat on the edge of the nearest table.

“Captain Augustus,” Enna suddenly declared. She fanned her snow white wings and held her head up high. “I am the Silent Princess Enna. If you don’t want to be torn to bits, you will take down this detaining spell immediately. We will take care of Harry and leave. If you do not, you will have to explain yourself to the Silent Queen and her armies.”

Without a word, Augustus tapped the silver ring. Jon, who had been leaning against the invisible barrier, nearly fell.

“Sariah, will you pick up all of the feathers Harry shed, so that nobody steps on them and gets hurt?” Vosenn asked as she and Enna strode toward Harry. Sariah nodded.

“Harry?” she asked as she walked up to him. “Are you with us?”

Harry nodded. “Yes Vosenn.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really? Impressive.”

“What happened?” He asked. “Where did Xaxx come from?”

Vosenn scowled. “We were telling Augustus that he needs to let at least one of us out to help you. We were thinking Gray, or myself. Just as Augustus was agreeing, Xaxx stepped forward and told him that he would be the best one to help you. Xaxx must have looked more capable than the rest of us, because Augustus let him out immediately.”

“We weren’t sure what he would do,” Ren said. “I thought for a second maybe he really did want to help, but he attacked you without hesitating.”

"He's been waiting for an opportunity since we got here," Harry acknowledged. "And I was looking like an easy target."

"What a coward," Gray said with distaste.

Enna reached forward, and caressed Harry's face. He smiled at her. Cool, soothing energy flowed over his skin, and he closed his eyes. Slowly, she ran her hands over his face and neck, arms and legs, paying special attention to the deep bites on his shoulders. They healed, leaving white crescent scars.

When she was done Harry glanced over his shoulder. Everyone was staying back. Dumbledore was at the forefront, looking right at him. The Headmaster looked speechless.

"We need to get out of here," Harry told the others. "Before we put anyone in more danger."

"To avoid bringing putting them in danger, or avoid facing them?" Sariah asked, stepping up and slipping a small pile of feathers into her pocket.

"Both," Harry said honestly.

Shetha stepped between the others and gave Harry a big hug. "I wasn't scared at all," she told him proudly.

"Really?" he asked her skeptically.

"Well, maybe a little," she admitted.

"I'll be getting you all out of here now," Harry announced. "I'm going to open a portal, just follow me through." He cleared his mind, trying to ignore his misery. I've got to leave Hogwarts now.

For the first time, the howling emptiness of the Void was welcome.

Harry approached Origin, trying to decide where to open a portal for them all to escape to. We have to go to Origin, he decided. I don't

know enough— anything at all really— about these other planets; I can't choose one that would work. And I can't go back to the City, or the Pit... I have to take them somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Somewhere new.

The dark smudge that was Everdark rotated slowly across Origin's surface, easy to spot. He waited until it was completely on the other side of the planet before touching his finger lightly to the sphere's surface, completing the link that opened a portal that spanned worlds, through space and time. He felt certain it was invisible, untraceable. He'd seen the portal opening in the Great Hall, but in the Void there were plenty of Earth-Origin portals, and he'd never seen a single one. This blue thread, which seemed so feeble, was his and his alone.

Harry coughed as he landed on the planet's surface. He experienced being ultimately cold one second, in the Void, and ultimately hot a split second later. Dust in the air filled his lungs and his eyes and for a moment he was blind. He took a couple steps forward, making space for those coming through behind him. They stepped through his portal onto the ground of Origin and were immediately choked with the sultry suffocating heat. He 'pulled up the ladder behind them' by noting where his thread hung in the air and touched down to the ground. He kicked it with one foot and snapped it.

"Harry, where is this exactly?" Vosenn demanded. "Oh!" she exclaimed, sounding very surprised by something.

"Don't know," Harry admitted. He looked over his ragged-looking group— and found a few too many. Vosenn was staring in wonder at Draco sitting at her feet, and Ron and Hermione were there as well.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, stunned.

"We wanted to make sure you were all going to be alright, and to help if we could," Hermione said firmly.

"They came sprinting up and leaped through the portal just as we did," Miren explained.

Vosenn kneeled by Draco. He looked at her sheepishly. “I wanted to stay with you.”

She smiled, a rare enough expression for her.

“I’m touched but...” Harry gestured. “Are you sure you don’t want to go back? Look at this place.”

There was nothing but desert as far as the eye could see, and it was ugly. Harry could usually see a unique beauty when he gazed at the desert along the Gods’ Landing: its pale creamy color complemented the dark green plants.

But not this desert. Harry looked down at the sand close up, it had the consistency of dirt and was a dreadful gray. There seemed to be only one type of plant, the evil twin of a fern, black, and covered with wicked spikes.

Hermione checked with Ron, before they nodded together. “We’ll stick with our decision,” she confirmed. “But we better find water or a town or something.”

Draco just shrugged.

“I definitely agree with that,” Sariah agreed grimly.

“Damn, it’s hot,” Vosenn swore.

“Understatement,” Jon said.

They squinted at the sky. The sun was a burst of pure blinding light, burning intensely.

“Ow,” Ren complained, and everyone blinked their eyes furiously trying to get rid of the spots that obscured their vision.

“Let’s go, I’m already sick of this place,” Ren pushed at Harry. “You know you should stop staring at the sun before you’re permanently blinded,” she advised. He didn’t budge.

Harry didn't notice her. The sun was doing something very strange: pulsing. The light grew and waned rhythmically, hypnotically. All thoughts in his head were replaced by a singular awareness of the sun above him.

Meanwhile, Ren was shaking him. "Harry? Harry?! Say something, what's wrong with you?"

Everyone gathered around.

Enna tried to get his attention. "Harry?"

"He's not responding," Hermione noted, "He's not even blinking."

Enna elbowed Ren aside, taking Harry's face in her hands and standing on tiptoe, kissed him on the mouth. The kiss lasted several seconds, and when Enna stepped back they waited for some sort of reaction, but none came.

"The sunsickness," Sariah said suddenly.

"NO," Vosenn, insisted, shaking Harry some more, trying to move him but he ignored her. "He can't."

"He can and he does," Sariah informed them grimly.

Finally Harry moved, throwing Vosenn's grip off briskly. He spread his wings wide, ready to take wing.

"Stop!" Enna pleaded, but he didn't hear her. Then he was in the air and gone, with a speed none of them could hope to follow.

"Someone needs to get him back," Ron said. "You can fly, right?" he asked Gray.

"Not that fast," Gray said regretfully. Harry was blurring into the sun.

"The sunsickness has no cure," Enna said softly, sadly. "They never come back."

“But...” Hermione was rendered speechless.

“We don’t even know where we are,” Ron finished. “And we can’t get back to Earth without him!”

Everyone stood around, stunned and dismayed. Enna burst into tears. Sariah went to comfort her. Nobody seemed to really be able to fully comprehend their loss.

“Harry saved us, he’s our protector,” Shetha said mournfully. “He’s invincible. He can’t just be gone that fast!”

“It’s too anticlimactic,” Miren protested. “If Harry is going to die, it’s going to be in epic battle.”

“Did you miss it?” Vosenn demanded, completely distraught. “He left us. He’s left us and gone to die somewhere and never come back.”

Enna cried harder. “Shut up Vosenn,” Sariah said scathingly, and everyone looked at her in shock.

That’s a reversal, Ren thought. Vosenn, who’s usually so in control, cares so much about responsibility and her duty that failing this utterly has completely unhinged her. And Sariah, usually the emotional one, cares so much about Enna that she’s trying to be strong... Harry, where have you gone?

He was out of sight now, and their last hopes along with him.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Wanderer

"Hermione, we may have been a little hasty diving through that portal after Harry," Ron commented.

"We've always stuck by Harry," Hermione explained, "I would have gone crazy, worrying about him if we had just let him leave. I would have tormented myself over it. I didn't want to miss the adventure." She sighed. "Though following Harry never went this badly before... and we've face Voldemort with him."

A few feet away from them, Vosenn sat in the sand, elbows on her knees, staring listlessly out to the desert. Draco sat beside her. He glanced over his shoulder at the two Gryffindors; there was no hostility in his gaze.

"He must really like her," Hermione said quietly. "He nearly beat us to the portal."

Gray walked up to them. "There is... no... water," he stated dejectedly.

"How can that be?" Hermione asked. "How can a place have no water? How are the plants surviving?"

Gray shrugged. "I'm not sure they're even plants."

"So what are we doing now?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, where did Ren go?" Hermione added.

"She volunteered to go scout in that direction." Gray gestured ahead of them. "Our casting stones are linked, so she won't get lost. I'm going to fly as high as I can to see if I can spot anything far away. Just... make sure everyone... keeps it together, alright?"

"Of course," Hermione promised.

With a nod, Gray spread his dappled gray wings, lunched up and flew away, wings beating powerfully.

Hermione shook her head with awe. "I just never get tired of that," she said. "Their wings are just so beautiful."

"Fat chance of keeping everyone together, though," Ron pointed out.

Vosenn was still staring listlessly, Draco at her side. Enna was crying, although she had no tears left, and Sariah was holding her and murmuring softly. Miren was trying to trample one of the evil plants, hoping to tenderize it, without success. Shetha and Thamn sat together, holding hands. Jon was digging. He was having quite an easy time of it, using one of Harry's feathers Sariah had gathered to slice through rocks. He'd been hoping to find moisture, but he was a couple feet down in his hole, and found nothing but the same gray sand down there, too.

"Ron," Hermione said suddenly, looking away from the others. Watching them was depressing. "What if we die out here?"

"What happened to 'keeping it together?'" Ron asked, giving her a comforting hug.

"Ron, you realize how fast we're all going to die without water, right?" Hermione cried, and hid her face on his shoulder.

"Enna first," Ron observed, "Now that she's cried all of the water out of her body."

"That's not funny," Hermione mumbled reproachfully.

"SHETHA!" Thamn suddenly yelled.

Everyone jumped.

"I thought he was mute," Jon remarked casually from his hole.

"Shetha!" Thamn cried, shaking her. She had slumped over.

Vosenn realized what had happened and threw off her depression, running to the small Vineadryad girl.

"Must have passed out from heat stroke," Vosenn said, and then mumbled something that sounded like, "...everyone die, my fault... crappy leader..."

"No," Thamn insisted. "Carry her back."

Draco helped Vosenn gently pick up the small girl, and they moved her over next to Jon's hole, laying her gently down.

Miren gasped. "Look!"

Where Shetha had slumped over, was a small patch of lush green grass in the shape of her body. As they watched, a few small vines rose up and stretched into small plants.

"Move her again," Jon suggested. They scooted her further away from the hole, and the same thing happened twice.

"Um..." Hermione said doubtfully. "So what do we do... roll her on the ground or something?"

Jon snorted.

Thamn shook his head. "Let her rest. She'll be able to do more, later."

"Jon, can't you like, build her something to keep her in the shade?" Sariah called over. Enna had stopped crying, they were watching in interest.

Jon looked at them over the rim of his hole. He shook his head, and filthy sand rained down from his hair. "You can't build anything out of dust!" he protested. A moment later Jon yelped and shouted, "DARK EYES!"

"What now?" Ron asked, and everyone ran over to look. They stopped and stared in wonder.

Next to Shetha's sleeping figure, in the little green patch of grass, a small spring of water came forth, hitting Jon in the face and trickling down into the hole.

"She... brought water?" Miren said, incredulously. He pranced, all four hooves moving somewhat nervously.

"I had no idea she was that powerful," Vosenn said, as Jon climbed out of the hole and shook off his feathers to dry them.

Thamn sat down next to her and smiled up at them, green vines on his head straightening. "She's going to be the next Spring-Bringer," he said with pride.

"That's why she's so special," Jon said. "Harry's going to love this—" he stopped, realizing what he'd said. "Sorry."

Somewhere else in the desert...

Ren wearily pushed her hair out of her eyes, feeling sweat trickle down the back of her neck. The sun beating down on the hard ground was piercingly bright, and she had to squint just to see the nothing that stretched as far as her keen eyes could see.

Ren had taken off at the first opportunity. She missed Harry too much to stand it, and Enna's weeping didn't help. Simply to get away for a bit, she'd gone to look for signs of life. Everything looked the same, for a while; until finally she found what she thought might barely be a road. It was wide flat strip of sand that seemed to go straight on forever in either direction.

Maybe I should have turned left? She wondered idly. Without warning her legs gave out and she found herself sitting in the middle of some prickly brush on the side of the road. Who am I kidding? It doesn't matter which way I go. There's nothing out here, we're the only ones. Nobody is dumb enough to actually live in this horrible place.

Ren laid her head on her knees, wishing she had some water. Dark Eyes, help me. MindRuin, Green Lady, Hermit God... ANYONE.

She thought for a second she heard a sound, maybe an animal. Lifting her head and looking around, she could see nothing, not even a bird. Some dust drifted by on the air, like a horrible, choking gray parody of mist. The sound came again, and she peered into the

distance, sure now that it was the sound of hooves. Far down the road the dust hovered in a thick cloud.

Someone coming along the road is kicking the dust up! She thought with excitement, and then realized she wouldn't be able to see who it was until they were nearly upon her. She touched her casting stone for reassurance. There was nowhere to hide near the road. I've been looking for signs of life anyway, I wouldn't hide. How can someplace this ugly be on Origin? She wondered woefully.

Anxiously she gripped her knees, waiting for whatever was hidden in the dust cloud to happen upon her. Abruptly something huge trotted into sight; a great big brown head of an animal, more than a yard across with wide set eyes like a grazer and two small curved horns on its forehead. The body following the head was matchingly massive, probably seven feet tall at the shoulder and as long as three centaurs standing in a row. It was covered in a funny layer of shaggy fur, thick but clearly cropped, with long wisps of hair swinging around the face that swung as it moved it's massive weight forward on it's hooves, the source of the loud clopping sound. It trotted slowly, but steadily, and its wide belly was securely encircled with a thick harness. The harness was pulling along what could be a cart or coach. The coach was rectangular and longer than the animal itself, rolling along on six wheels. It was covered with a tent-like covering.

What had passed her notice on first glance was a figure, seated on the back of the beast just in front of the harness, bobbing along comfortably with the trotting gait and holding on with an easy grip to the fur.

"Whoa," a male voice cried, and the beast slowed its steps, braking the coach and coming to an inevitable stop just short of where Ren was sitting and watching in amazement. The figure stayed seated, looking down at her from great height. The beast was eyeing her, breathing out of its nose in little snuffles.

Ren tilted her head back as far as it would go and shielded her eyes from the sun with her hand.

It was a Bloodbeast. Ren's immediate reaction was fear; Xaxx's betrayal was still fresh. The Bloodbeast was young, with long hair, and a lack of shirt showed his muscular chest and broad, deeply tanned shoulders. He was lightly furry and had black claws that gleamed in the sun.

He smiled down at her, flashing his teeth. "What have we got here?"

Despite the heat, Ren shivered once. Biting her lip she leaned away and watched him guardedly. She didn't answer.

"Oh, come on. It's not every day you come across a pretty young lady sitting on the side of a path in the middle of the widest desert in Origin. How did you get here?"

"M' lost," she mumbled.

He looked around the desert, seemingly unfazed by the sun and the heat. "No kidding."

Bloodbeasts are desert people, she thought. He sounds like he knows exactly where we are, and where he's going.

"What is that?" She asked, nodding at his mount.

"It's a Sanaan Buffalo," the Bloodbeast said, patting the creature on the head. "Her name is Bubbles."

Bubbles, Ren thought incredulously, thinking she might be delirious, or hallucinating. A Sanaan Buffalo called Bubbles. In the middle of the desert.

"Where are we?" She asked.

"No one actually bothered to name this place," he commented, as if that were fascinating. "I'm not particularly surprised, as no one has ever lived here, but I've always wondered what a big blank spot was doing on the map. Now I know."

"You're here out of curiosity?" she asked in disbelief. Wonderful. He's crazy, just what we need.

"Something like that," he affirmed. "Now what is your name?"

"Ren," she told him curtly.

"You look afraid. Don't worry, Bubbles has never stepped on anyone before, she's harmless," He said nonchalantly.

Ren raised an eyebrow at him.

He laughed, amused. "Ah, I'm not stupid. I know it's me you're wary of." He waved a hand dismissively. "I'm used to it."

Ren wasn't sure what to say to this, it wasn't very informative.

"Just trust me," he said soothingly. "Do you think there's anything to fear from someone who calls their pet buffalo Bubbles?"

"You're certainly the oddest Bloodbeast I've ever met," she couldn't help agreeing. Still she didn't move. "I was actually traveling with a Bloodbeast a short time ago."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"He betrayed us and tried to kill my cousin," Ren said bluntly.

The Bloodbeast winced. "Another reason for me to avoid my kind, then."

Liking this response and thinking he at least appeared honest, she got to her feet and brushed the dirt off her behind, trying to pull out some of the prickly bits from the brush that stuck to her.

He leaned down, reaching a hand out to her. "I'm called the Wanderer."

Ren hesitated, and then took the hand. He held on securely, taking a big handful of fur with his other hand to anchor himself and lifted her up until she could scramble onto the buffalo's back, sitting behind him.

"I'm with some friends, I need to go back to them," she told him.  
"Which way will get us out of here?"

"That way," the Wanderer said, and pointed at his coach. "Let's go pick them up."

Ren sighed huge sigh of relief, almost slumping off the buffalo. The back was wide and flat, other than the slight ridge of spine down the center.

"You have no idea how glad I am to finally see someone out here," she told him.

The Wanderer slapped the buffalo's shoulder lightly. Bumbles lurched back into motion and Ren grabbed some fur to hold on to.

"Which way?" he asked.

"There," Ren pointed the way back to the others, perpendicular to the road. The Wanderer reached down beside his ankles with impressive flexibility and loosened some buckles. Bumbles took a step forward, and the straps to the cart were released. Tugging on her fur, the Wanderer led her off-road.

"You're going to leave your cart here?" Ren asked, and then felt silly.  
"Right, there isn't anyone to steal it, is there."

"Right," he confirmed.

After traveling a minute, a speck appeared in the sky, which looked more and more like a large bird the closer they came.

"Is that a Silent?" the Wanderer asked.

"Uh-huh," Ren said.

"Who exactly are you traveling with?" he asked curiously.

"Five Silents, three Humans, two Vineadryads, and a Centaur," she said promptly. She looked closer at the flying form. "I think that's my brother," she added.

"Brother?" he repeated.

"We're both half Silent, half Human," she explained. "It has unreliable results."

"You have interesting friends, Ren," the Wanderer said, sounding sincere. "How did you all end up in the middle of the Desert With No Name?"

I won't tell him everything, but I have to trust him a little, Ren decided. "We were traveling with a Portal Guide... my cousin, actually. We were in a sticky situation, the Bloodbeast that was supposed to be on our side suddenly attacked him. My cousin fought him off... took his eye out, that was a nice touch... and ported us away in a hurry. As soon as we got here, he got the Sun-Sickness..." Surprising herself, she had to stop and wipe tears from her eyes. The Wanderer pretended not to notice.

"I have to tell you," he said, "No one goes through here, you're pretty damn lucky I was passing through. It's not very hospitable."

"I noticed," she said dryly.

Ahead of them the others had spotted the giant beast heading in their direction, as well as Ren seated on it. Gray had landed among them, and they were watching in amazement as the buffalo ran right up to them and slowed to a stop. The others stayed back, warily.

"Ren?" Vosenn called questioningly.

Ren grinned. "Everyone, meet Bumbles and the Wanderer. He has a cart back that way; he's going to let us catch a ride out of here with him!"

"Is that right?" Gray asked suspiciously.

The Wanderer swung a leg over Bumbles' head, dropping off gracefully. He held out a hand for Ren and helped her slide to the ground. Stepping up to Gray, he nodded. "Yes. I can't leave you all out here to die. Ren told me about the Bloodbeast that attacked your cousin, and I'd like you to remember that just because we're of the same race doesn't mean we're anything alike. You're going to have to trust me."

Vosenn nodded, liking his straightforward manner. "Where are we, Wanderer? Did Ren explain how we got here?"

The Wanderer nodded, pulling out his map. "We're right about... here, on the map."

Vosenn frowned. "But there isn't anything there."

"Precisely!" the Wanderer said.

"We can't be nowhere," Gray protested.

"Yes we can," the Wanderer corrected. "This place has never been claimed or given a name. I came here simply because I like to be away from regular civilization from time to time, and I'd never been to the blank spot on the map. You're lucky I'm eccentric." He laughed. "You see, this is how it came to be... as Silents, you come from Everdark, am I right?"

They nodded.

"Well Everdark," the Wanderer continued, "is named thus because the planet rotates in such a way that it is always night. Dark Eyes made it so. However, naturally there was created a place on the exact opposite side of the planet, which is always in the sun."

They frowned— they'd never thought of that before.

"Call if Everlight, if you'd like," the Wanderer offered. "In the end none of the other Gods wanted Everlight either, so no one claimed it, not even Wrath. People have been pretending it doesn't exist ever since."

"How far to the nearest town?" Vosenn asked.

"A couple weeks, by cart. The going will be slow, some of us will have to walk or fly. We'll have to ration the water, as well."

"Well... we could always take some water from the oasis. And if we wait a little longer, the berries will be ripe," Jon told them.

The Wanderer looked at Jon with an uncomprehending expression.  
"There isn't an oasis in Everlight."

Jon stepped aside, revealing a pool of clear blue water surrounded with a few small bushes, heavy with unripe berries.

The Wanderer blinked at it. "... where did that come from?"

"That wasn't there when I left!" Ren exclaimed.

Vosenn smiled. "Shetha made it."

"She made it?" Ren repeated.

"Who is this Shetha?" the Wanderer asked.

Shetha was seated next to the pool of water with Enna and her brother. She waved with a smile and cupped her hands to take a drink.

"A very talented Vineadryad," Jon replied.

Looking very impressed, the Wanderer nodded. "Well then. I'll go back and get some supplies from the cart, we can camp here. It would be dusk right now, on other parts of the world. I would recommend you try to ignore the sun and get some rest. In a couple hours hopefully the berries will be ripe. We can fill up on water then and be on our way."

Vosenn nodded agreement, and the Wanderer turned to get back on Bumbles.

"I'd like to come," Ren told him, and he reached down and pulled her up as before.

As they trotted away, the Wanderer commented, "You all look... wilted. Your cousin must really have been someone special."

"He was," Ren said sadly.

## Chapter Thirty: Sky's End

The Wanderer brought back from his cart an enormous white tent and a sack of dried meat and grass for Bumbles. Vosenn, Draco, Gray and Ren helped him put up the tent, marveling at its size.

"You just happen to carry around tents large enough for twenty people?" Vosenn asked him skeptically.

The Wanderer smiled. "Well... I wasn't going to say anything, but... I usually sleep in the cart. This is Bumbles' tent. She'll be fine outside though."

Everyone cuddled together in little groups inside the tent. Hydrated by the oasis spring and sheltered from the worst of the heat and the sun, they got some sleep. When they awoke hours later, they sat together by the pool and sipped the cool, sweet tasting spring water, chewed on dried meat, and picked the small red berries.

"There's a miniature oasis in the middle of the Everlight," The Wanderer said to himself, very amused by the idea.

"It might grow a bit, over time," Shetha told him, and he smiled at her.

"So Wanderer," Vosenn asked. "Tell us more about yourself... that you're eccentric isn't enough information."

"I grew up in a medium-sized nomadic Bloodbeast tribe," he divulged, "I had a normal Bloodbeast childhood, but I was different. I wasn't interested in having a Bloodbeast life. They live in the same desert their whole lives, and just attack everything that gets in their way. I wanted to see more of the world, I wanted to see the ocean and the mountains and the forests. It was clear I didn't fit in, and I started getting into some nasty fights. Eventually it got so bad that I just left. I traveled by myself for a while... it was hard at first. Everyone is distrustful of Bloodbeasts, and I don't blame them. But it's hard to convince people that you're different when they think you're lying to take them off their guard, that you'll kill them the second their back is turned. Luckily when I was in the Sanaan plains I met Bumbles, who had been separated from her herd somehow, and we took to each other. I bought some wheels, built the cart, and from then on I didn't

care if people welcomed me or not because I didn't need them. With Bumbles I could roam as far as I liked. I trade in the villages I get to, and since I travel so much the things I pick up are worth a lot more the further I travel with them. I've been wandering for years now." The Wanderer smiled. "That's why I'm known as the Wanderer."

"So... have you traveled... everywhere?" Ren asked.

The Wanderer shook his head. "Not even close, I've been at it for ten years, but there is always more to see on Origin. But I'm trying my best."

"It's kind of the opposite for me," Ren explained. "I've only ever been to the Pit, my grandfather's home in the City, a single castle on Earth, and this desert."

"There's a hell of a lot more out there to see," he told her.

"I know," she said. "I would have loved to stay in the Pit, I have my family there and it's my home. But it's just so hard for me, I don't fit in. I feel like I'm a Silent on the inside, but not on the outside."

"And I'm a Bloodbeast on the outside, but not on the inside," the Wanderer added. "It's opposite but the same, really."

"I still haven't found where I belong," Ren said softly.

"With us, of course," Gray said, and leaned over to give her a hug.

Ren smiled. "I know." She looked at her brother speculatively. "Remember how we used to fight all the time? How silly was that?"

"Seems pointless now, doesn't it?" Gray agreed.

"Are we ready to get going?" Vosenn asked.

"Wait," Enna said suddenly. This was the first word to pass her lips since Harry's disappearance, and everyone stopped and looked to her. "I have something to say," she said softly, unable to make eye contact.

It's like she's completely reverted to how she was before Harry came along, Ren thought. She was doing so well.

"Harry is alive," Enna said. Around the circle, jaws dropped.

"How do you know?" Vosenn asked.

Enna hid her face, unable to continue.

"She and Harry are bonded," Ren explained. "Like soul mates."

Enna nodded. "If he were dead, I would know. Harry is alive."

The moon seemed to shine weakly through the windows as Professor McGonagall stepped into the Headmaster's Office, where Dumbledore sat behind his desk quietly waiting.

"Headmaster?" she asked softly.

"Take a seat Minerva," Dumbledore offered, and she sat down. "I thought I'd call you here, as you were the most upset by today's events. Harry was one of your own Gryffindors, and Ron and Hermione as well."

"That must be why you asked me to come," said another voice behind her, as Severus Snape stepped into the room and took a seat next to McGonagall.

"For Draco, yes," Dumbledore nodded. He picked up something small from his desk and held it up to show them. It was a small dark red rock, almost crystalline in the way it caught the light. "Harry's aunt Madalena left this for me, along with a note explaining that it's very brittle and should I shatter it she would be alerted that something went wrong." He threw it to the ground beside the desk, where it cracked and seemed to crumble. "They seem to like rocks quite a bit," he noted.

They waited in anticipation, and a few minutes later the air stirred in the room and an elegant woman with dark brown hair stepped into the room.

"I came as fast as I could," Madalena told them. "I had to get someone to make a portal for me." She looked at them expectantly.

"You're not human either, are you?" Dumbledore asked her bluntly.

"Oh," she said, "I see how it is." She removed an amulet from her neck and tucked it away in her pocket, and her richly toned dark brown wings came forth. "What's happened?"

"The Earth-based Otherworld Control Center learned we had people from another world among us," Dumbledore explained. "They came and tried to remove them from the school. What I didn't know," he said pointedly, "Was that I was harboring non-humans."

"Is that a problem?" Madalena asked calmly.

"No," Dumbledore said. "I just wish someone had warned me. So as the Control finished collecting them—Vosenn, Miren, Shetha, Thamn, Enna, Sariah, Zack, Jon, Gray, Ren, and to our surprise, Harry—a portal opened and ice lizards attacked."

"Oh dear," Madalena said.

"Precisely. They killed several Control-men, but no students, thankfully. Harry ended up—once again, to our surprise—defending everyone and killing all the lizards. Tell me, who were those children really?"

"Zack is the Bloodbeast Chief-Prince, Shetha is a powerful Vineadryad and Thamn is her twin. Miren is the grandson of the Eldest Centaur. Ren was simply Harry's cousin, a half-Silent. Enna was the Silent princess, and a healer. Vosenn, Jon, Sariah, Gray and Harry were part of a Silent army unit ordered to protect them," she added, "Oh, and Harry was also a Portal Guide, you may have noticed."

"Yes, we most certainly did," McGonagall said. "He fought all the ice lizards, and finally killed them all by disappearing, into the Void I

presume, and returning. They had literally frozen solid, and shattered.”

Madalena leaned forward. “He did what?!”

“Froze them,” McGonagall repeated.

“He was in the middle of fighting, but he ported into the Void?”

“Yes...” McGonagall affirmed, taken aback by the look on Madalena’s face. “Is that strange? Other than the obvious.”

“It certainly is,” Madalena told them. She glanced around almost guiltily. “I’m glad I came straight here and didn’t bring the Queen with me. She can’t know about this. You see, freezing their enemies in the Void is not a move commonly employed by the Cursed. Maybe in ancient times it was, before they were all restrained, but not nowadays. First of all because Portal Guides are very carefully supervised when making portals, and secondly because creating portals requires focus. When attacked or when fighting, Cursed literally go insane and lose the ability to focus altogether. If Harry ported in the middle of the fight, it implies that he retained a measure of control. This is rare, and if the Queen knew about it he would be locked up in the deepest dungeon of the Pit, forever,” she said anxiously. “Since I care for Harry’s well-being, I’m going to pretend you didn’t tell me about it.”

McGonagall looked alarmed. “Yes, alright.”

“That’s why Lily and my brother came to Earth with Harry, they were worried he would be locked up if they stayed on Origin... they were right. What happened next?” Madalena prompted.

“Zack turned into a Bloodbeast, and promptly attacked Harry,” McGonagall said.

Madalena’s eyes blazed with fury. “How appalling! I knew we shouldn’t have trusted him!”

"Harry fought him too," McGonagall continued, "And Zack fled out the door. We haven't been able to find him. Enna healed Harry, and opened a portal and they all left through it. Only at the last second, three of our students, friends of Harry and of Vosenn, dove through the portal as well."

"Oh dear," Madalena said again. "I'm very sorry. I hope they're all in a safe place. I trust Harry will take care of them, they're in good hands."

"I'm sure he will," Dumbledore agreed.

Harry slowly opened his eyes. A refreshing wind was pulling at his clothing and hair. He was lying on his back on a hard stony surface, wings stretched out to either side. In front of his eyes clouds were drifting slowly by, white and billowy on a beautiful blue sky.

Am I dead? He wondered.

Harry enjoyed the view for a minute longer, the shifting shapes almost relaxing him back into sleep. Deciding it was important to figure out where he was, he sat up slightly and leaned on his elbows. It was a stony platform, perfectly round, and he was lying near an edge. Leaning over, he peered down to find only clouds. The platform was miraculously suspended in the sky, with nothing to explain itself but a single door with nothing behind it. The door was stone as well, and both were engraved with runic lettering and strange swirling patterns and shapes.

He looked at the door speculatively. Just because there's nothing behind it, doesn't mean it doesn't lead anywhere, he thought. The door opened a crack. He wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been looking right at it, because the movement was soundless. The crack widened.

Harry couldn't help his reaction to the woman who stepped out. She didn't look many years older than him, but what made his jaw drop was her looks. She was simply unreal. Her skin was luminous, smooth and flawless, and her hair was unlike anyone's he'd seen before. Each lock of hair was a slightly different color, a range of reds and golds that twisted down around her shoulders. Her dress was strapless, coming held together in the front by corset laces low

enough to show the swell of her breasts above it. The skirt half had slits on both sides that started at her hips and revealed long, perfectly shaped legs and feet. She was adorned with gold jewelry; little toe-rings and bangle bracelets, and a choker of gold links. Besides all this finery, what struck him most was the color of her eyes. They were extremely strange: a bright blood red. Overall she looked simply unnatural. Harry felt the urge to leap off the stone platform, but stayed put, captivated.

"Welcome to Sky's End," she said.

For a second Harry was too distracted by the sound of her voice, which was as entrancing as her looks, to take in what she had said.

"What?" he asked dumbly.

"My name is Luscious. I'm your welcoming committee." She smiled.  
"You can call me Lush."

Besides her red eyes, Harry was thrown off by her demeanor. She oozed arrogance. He'd never met anyone more opposite of Enna in his life. If Lush had been ugly the contrast would have been complete. Harry called up Enna's face in his minds eye, focusing on her as distraction.

Lush held out a hand, expecting him to take it. Harry decided to get up on his own, not touching her. She removed withdrew her hand, unfazed, and calmly gestured to the door.

"What is Sky's End?" Harry asked her suspiciously.

Her smile deepened. Lush reminded Harry strongly of a graceful but ferocious cat. She looked smug. "The home of the Gods."

Whatever Harry had been expecting, it was not that. "This is where the Gods live?" he asked with awe, disbelievingly.

"Beyond this door," she affirmed.

"How did I get here?" He asked. The Sun-sickness, he realized. That's what happened to me—I caught the Sun-sickness and now I'm here.

"You were called," she said loftily. "It's a great honor."

Harry looked her over again. "Does that make you a God?"

"Of course," Lush stepped toward the door, and it opened wider of its own accord. "I'm the Goddess of Desire."

## Chapter Thirty-One: The Whole Story

Lush and Harry stepped through the door at Sky's End and stood in a very large, round room. It was completely empty. The surfaces in it looked stone and weathered, ancient like the door. On the continuous cylindrical wall were evenly spaced doors, some of them made out of different materials, such as granite or wood or metal, and some of them were blank. Others had bright symbols etched into them in a myriad of colors.

Lush continued on nonchalantly, and Harry stopped, hoping she would explain the strange room to her, asking, "Where do the doors lead to?"

"Different places. This is where the Gods convene when they need to meet over something, but only officially. They usually just visit each other. The doors are marked with the symbol of the God they lead to. Some of the Gods live at Sky's End, and these are their rooms. If they live someplace else it leads to where they are... so it doesn't make a difference. The other doors bring you to different sections of Sky's End. I'll be leaving you for a little while, you can stay in this room here and get yourself something to eat, not everyone who lives at Sky's End is a God."

She walked up to a large bronze door, opening it for him.

"What is 'a little while?'" Harry asked, worried about what sense of time a Goddess would have. 'A little while' could be like... three years.

"About half an hour," Lush responded as he stepped through the Bronze door, and then she closed it.

Until the door closed he didn't truly realize how much she'd been taking up his attention, he'd barely been able to take his eyes off of her to look around the room. Now he saw it was an enormous, crowded hall filled with many tables, and long tables heavy with platters of food stood on the far end. Not everyone was eating; it seemed to be a meeting place as well as a dining hall. He looked over the room's occupants curiously; they seemed to be from a variety of races. A few unreal looking people were glowing slightly; Harry thought they might be lesser Gods and Goddesses, like Lush.

A full table on the far side of the room was completely surrounded by Cursed Silents, sitting side by side as if it were a completely normal thing to be doing.

He was confused, but hungry. The others must be hungry, He thought. There isn't exactly a buffet like this one in the middle of the desert. As soon as I'm finished talking to Lush I need to get back to them right away.

Harry found a plate and started loading it with all sorts of delicious foods, there seemed to be whole menus from every single race and culture he'd ever heard of. He found himself some nice steak and vegetables and a baked potato, then stopped uncertainly.

Suddenly one of the Cursed Silents walked up to Harry. Harry eyed him warily, but as the other Cursed didn't seem to be having any difficulty with each other he wasn't either. This one looked about in his mid-twenties, but with Silents you never could tell for sure. He had dark curly hair and deep brown eyes with a searching, penetrating gaze.

"Hello, you're new," The Cursed said with easy charisma, extending a hand. "My name is Etilon, why don't you take a seat."

"Harry," Harry said, shaking his hand. As they went back to the table the situation began to make sense. The way the others glanced at him and looked away quickly, Etilon was clearly the leader. He wants to know if I'm going to be a threat, Harry realized. He's showing me that he's in charge.

"Move over, let Harry have a seat by me," Etilon ordered, settling down at the end of the table. Someone vacated a seat next to it, moving to another one, and Harry uncomfortably took the empty spot. "So Harry, did you die or just fly away?"

"What?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"When they called you. Sometimes people try to hold us back when we're called and we have to die to get here," Etilon explained.

"I definitely didn't die," Harry assured him. "The sun-sickness? It's a call?"

Etilon nodded, eating his meal, and Harry began as well. "Well it's good you didn't die. Doesn't make much of a difference, but it's kind of weird knowing you're dead."

"I'm not staying long," Harry told him. "Someone is coming back for me and then I'm leaving."

"You can't leave," Etilon said with conviction. "No one ever goes back."

"But I have to," Harry insisted.

Etilon raised his eyebrows and shrugged, Harry had the feeling that the older Cursed was humoring him.

"What do you do here?" Harry asked him.

"Whatever the Gods require of us," Etilon said between bites. "They call anyone they need, but the most direct way to do it is to use the sun, so sometimes the choices are limited." He looked with a slight sneer down the table, as if he didn't find a few there worthy to live among Gods.

Harry finished his meal, wondering how much time had passed, and when Lush would be coming back for him. Once empty, his plate disappeared. The food hasn't been replaced or reheated but it's still warm, the plates clean themselves... this is an interesting place. Though somehow I doubt they're using house-elves.

Uneasy at the table, Harry waved shortly to Etilon and left to wander around while he waited for Lush. He didn't want to leave the room, but it was large enough for him to stretch his legs. He passed a table where someone was sitting dejectedly, glowing.

"You look down," Harry ventured as he passed the glowing man, who must be a God.

"My people are destroying my planet and killing each other," he said woefully.

"That's... unfortunate," Harry replied, not sure what to say to someone who owned their own planet.

"Harry," some called softly, and Harry looked up to see Lush standing in the doorway. He quickly walked to her and they left the dining room behind.

"Which God was I talking to?" Harry asked her.

"The Double-Sided One," Lush said.

Harry frowned. He presides over Earth, though, doesn't he?

Lush looked over the doors in the round room. There was something in her face, an almost imperceptible expression of irritation or anger. She definitely doesn't look happy.

Lush continued on to a door with a purple symbol on it, and knocked. A few seconds later, it opened of its own accord, like the entrance door had done.

Harry realized he was holding his breath. A short tunnel ended ahead of them with shining dazzling light, and Lush walked ahead of him down the tunnel. The door closed. Nervously Harry followed.

The room he stepped into was well lit and had lots of fabric and drapery. Directly in front of him was a semicircle of comfortable sofas and chaises, all in purple velvet. Standing in front of the sofas was a woman in a long elegant dress with a train behind it, and layers of soft purple fabric. Most of her face was completely obscured with a veil, weighed down with a trim of small beads. The whole figure glowed, and behind the veil Harry could see a pair of eyes looking right at him.

"Hello, Harry," she said serenely, opening her graceful hands in a gesture of welcome.

The faint red glow Lush was emitting seemed really pale all of a sudden, and Harry realized he was facing one of the great main Gods. He quickly recalled what he'd read in Legends of Origin. Purple... purple is the color of MindRuin, Goddess of Light. That's why she's wearing a veil, her face is supposed to be so beautiful that it destroys the minds of mortals who look upon it.

"Lush, what exactly is the meaning of all this," MindRuin asked calmly, though her eyes stayed on Harry. "Why did you have your mother call him?"

Lush glared slightly. "It doesn't pertain to you."

MindRuin looked at her sharply. "You know it does. Go now, tell the Sun Goddess not to call anyone when not specifically requested to do so."

Lush's mother is the Sun Goddess, Harry deduced. And her father is Wrath, God of War and Destruction, I read that in The Legends of Origin. They called her the Goddess of Sex there.

Lush turned abruptly and left with bold, indignant strides.

"Have a seat, Harry," MindRuin instructed, sitting down on one of the plush sofas.

Harry complied. "If this is a mistake, can I go back, then?"

MindRuin thought for a moment. "Perhaps it can be arranged. Understand, Sky's End is unlike everywhere else. In order to see it and enter, you must become like it. If you simply flew back to where you came from, no one would be able to see you. It's convenient when we have those like yourself working for us, they can move around unseen. It's not my department, though."

"Alright," Harry said with a sigh. "Who can I talk to about leaving?"

MindRuin was looking at him thoughtfully. "Not quite yet," she said.

Harry bit his lip, wondering what the Goddess was thinking.

"There's someone here who would be disappointed if you left without saying hello," MindRuin informed him.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Your mother."

Harry stared at the Goddess, completely stunned. Meeting my family in Origin, Madalena, Lexian, Amanda and my cousins, was one thing. That was amazing. But... my mother is dead. She died when I was one year old. He then countered that thought with, But this is Sky's End. There are dead people here, Etilon told me. Could she somehow have come here after she died? What about my father?

"Really?" Harry finally asked.

"Truly." MindRuin sounded pleased.

"And my father?" Harry asked.

MindRuin shook her head. "That was unfortunate. He was lost to us."

"So where can I find my mother?" Harry wanted to know. He didn't believe it yet. But I need to at least look.

"Go back out the door," MindRuin gestured to the direction he'd come from. "And find another with a pale violet coloring."

Harry got to his feet. "Wouldn't that be another God's door?" he pointed out.

MindRuin nodded. "Yes. My daughter, the Goddess of Love."

"My mother works for her?" Harry asked. I wonder what she does there... if she's there. He was getting more and more confused. He didn't know what to expect when he went to find his mother. It couldn't be a joke, could it? If it's not, that would be incredible... imagine, finding her here of all places, after all these years.

"No, its Lily's room," MindRuin clarified.

Harry just looked at her blankly. What?

"Harry, your mother is a Goddess," MindRuin told him gently. "I'm sure she has a lot to tell you."

Without another word, Harry left. He couldn't even think, nothing seemed to be working but his feet. Finding the pale violet door he reached out to knock, but it began to open right as he was about to touch it. A hallway beyond had wooden floors and a few wood doors. Harry waited, wondering if one would open for him.

For a second he thought one had, but someone had opened it to step through. The woman was a complete stranger to Harry, and clad in bright green. He was familiar enough with Sky's End by now to know immediately that this was a Goddess, but also that it wasn't the one who lived here. Harry's first impression was that she was elegant, regal looking and composed, but her eyes narrowed as she saw Harry and she looked irate.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Harry was still frozen, and stared at her silently with wide eyes. What did I do?

"You're in the wrong place," the Goddess told him. "Next time pay better attention to where you're going."

Harry took a step back.

"Aya," someone said softly behind the woman. "It's okay."

Aya, like the Ayan Wilderness... it's the Green Lady.

The Green Lady put her hands on hips, turning back. "Dark Eye shouldn't let his people wander where they like," she said, tone completely different. She sounded concerned, now.

I wouldn't expect the Green Lady to have a temper... but then again Mother Nature isn't always kind. Hurricanes, for example.

"He's not one of Dark Eye's people," said the person in the next room to Aya. "He's my son."

Aya frowned. "Your son?"

Then Lily walked through the door, green eyes and wavy red hair, every single inch of her Lily Potter from Harry's photo album. Exactly as he would always imagine she would look like. She stared at Harry for a moment in wonder, clearly surprised to see him, and then stepped forward and Harry found himself held tightly in a warm hug. He came unfrozen all of a sudden, hugging her back. They stood like that for a while, just holding each other, and Harry closed his eyes.

When at last they stepped apart, Harry could see she had tears on her face.

He couldn't believe it, couldn't even begin to believe it. He had thought initially she looked just like the photos, but he wasn't entirely right. She was more beautiful, somehow ethereal, beyond human. Her pale glow and her looks was all he needed to see to know that MindRuin had been honest with him.

"I haven't seen him since he was a baby," Lily told Aya. She didn't seem to need words for Harry, she had taken his hand and began walking with him.

"But... you had a son, with one of... them?" Aya asked incredulously.  
"Sorry, it's alright if you did, I'm just surprised by it."

"It's complicated," Harry's mother said with a shrug.

"I'll leave you with your son, then," Aya started walking in the other direction. "I was on my way anyway. But you have to tell me all about it later, yes?"

"Yes," Lily agreed, and led Harry through the door. Harry glanced around. It was filled with eclectic objects and styles, strangely

combining many things familiar to him and many things that weren't. The furniture reminded him of Hogwarts, but the stone walls were very much like the Pit.

They sat down, still holding hands tightly. "You haven't said anything, Harry." Lily noticed anxiously. "Is everything alright?"

Harry just nodded. Here she is, holding my hand, as real as anything. A couple thoughts stuck him in succession: MindRuin said Lily was her daughter... my mother is MindRuin's daughter. And a Goddess. The Goddess of Love, to be exact. But that would make MindRuin my grandmother... she doesn't look like a grandmother. If MindRuin is my grandmother, and my mother is a Goddess, then what does that make me? Why was a Goddess going to Hogwarts? How was my mother killed?

Harry shook his head. "I don't... understand. How?" he asked, wishing he could ask all of his questions at once.

"How what? How am I a Goddess?"

Harry nodded. "How everything."

She seemed to understand how lost he was. "I was born a Goddess," she told him, leaning back into the soft pillow cushions on the sofa. "There are the six main Gods that have existed... what seems like always. Then there are Gods that have been created by the main Gods over time, to take over some of the many responsibilities of the Gods... or sometimes for no reason, just because the main God wished to. And then there's also a small number of Gods who are born, literally."

"So if MindRuin is your mother... your father was a God too?"

Lily looked amused at this. "Yes, well... my mother has always been attracted to the dark and dangerous type. Her opposite. They don't really get along, so they can't actually be together for any length of time, but now and then they see each other. My father is Dark Eyes. I don't know him very well; I've always been my mother's daughter."

“What about me?”

“You were born under... unusual circumstances. I’ll explain that next. Your father was mortal, so you’re half... you have the potential to be a demi-god, if you wanted to spend some time here and learn how.” Lily pulled her brows together, concerned. “Harry? Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It’s been a very long day,” Harry said. “Life has a habit of dumping everything on me at once.” First I find out I’m a wizard— at the same time I find out I’m the Boy-Who-Lived and my parents were murdered. When I’m finally used to that, I find out my father was from another world and I have wings and a curse, then on top of that my family. Now that I’m finally used to that, I find out my mother is the Goddess of Love and I might be a demi-god. This tops it all.

“Of course I want to spend time with you,” Harry told his mother with feeling, “But I need to find out how to leave, my friends are stranded in a desert, I have to help them.”

“I understand.” Lily nodded solemnly.

“First, tell me the whole story,” Harry said. “I could stay just a little longer.” I can’t leave, not without understanding.

“I’ll give you the short version,” Lily promised. “So here I am, a young Goddess in Sky’s End, and I didn’t really know what to do with myself. Everyone is so busy, everyone is passionate about their subjects, everyone has a place and a job. But I wasn’t created for a purpose like many Gods are, I was just born. So I decided to... live. Gods can’t pass as humans very well, we can do it for short periods of time but people begin to become uneasy, they sense it somehow. But I could be born with a human body, only I would be limited to that body, its abilities, aging process, and lifespan. The Green Lady thought that human would be good because they have a fairly short lifespan and then I would be back, they didn’t think I’d want to commit to anything more complicated. So I did it. As a human, I didn’t look much like my human family, the influence of my presence overrode genetics as I grew to look more and more like my true self. Someone planted the idea of my name, as well. In the back of my mind I knew who I really

was, it was just a fact, like the sky is blue. I found out I was a witch, and had seven wonderful years at Hogwarts, where I met your father. I could always tell something was odd about James... it drew everyone to him, he was very well liked. It drew me to him too; we were both different in our own ways. It wasn't until later that he revealed to me that he was a Silent... I never told him about this. I felt guilty about it, he revealed his secret, but there was no way I could tell him mine. He had proof, I had none. Imagine if someone suddenly told you she was a Goddess in human form?"

"There's no way I'd ever believe something like that," Harry confirmed.

"Exactly. So I married James, and then you were born," Lily stopped and smiled, reminiscing. "You were so adorable, with your little gray downy wings... a short time after you were born, we were living among the Silents, and one day I went in to see if you were still asleep in your crib, and my father was standing over it. I was really surprised; I didn't expect to see him. I knew my mother would probably come by to see you and maybe him as well but it takes effort to be seen. What he did then, was apologize. All he said was, 'I'm sorry.'"

Harry didn't understand, and tilted his head questioningly.

"The curse... he started it. He didn't give it to you specifically, but it all began with him. I suppose he felt responsible. He didn't explain, but I knew immediately what he meant. I knew that if the Queen's people found out, they would make sure you never left, and you would be trapped there forever. I didn't have the heart to tell James yet, so I went to Madalena instead, she'd given James the disguise that let him attend Hogwarts in the first place. She told me she could make one for you, and we could go back to Earth, we just wouldn't be able to bring you back. We left right away."

"I didn't find out until this summer," Harry told her. "The amulet worked really well."

"I want to hear about it one day," she decided, "I check on you sometimes. At the first I watched you all the time, but it was too

painful. But I haven't gotten that far yet— everything would have been fine, and then along came Voldemort. You know the prophecy?"

Harry nodded darkly, thinking of Sirius.

"When Voldemort found out about it, and we hid, we didn't think we'd be found... but then he came." Her face mirrored Harry's now, both angry and sad. "I was confined to limits of my body. Yet still, I knew I could withstand anything Voldemort had to offer. I was strong. But I was scared, for you and your father. Then Voldemort hit James with the killing curse, and he was down. I couldn't tell if he was alive or not... he was a Silent, a magically gifted one, he was remarkably immune to spells cast on him. I didn't know if it was enough. I tried to stop him... in the end I was knocked out. It really stretched my limits, I almost died that night. When I woke up again, James wasn't there. His clothes were, though."

"... What?" Harry interrupted, confused.

"Are you familiar with the concept of how Silents die?" Lily asked in a very quiet, serious voice.

"Oh..." Harry murmured, comprehending. If he woke up and my mother was dead, it would have undone him.

"He survived the curse, because he was a Silent. However... I was not, and you were just a baby. He didn't know the truth about me." She wasn't looking at Harry anymore, but somewhere far away. "I never told him. So when he came upon us lying there 'dead' he... was just gone. Faded away. Then I looked at you, and you, for all appearances, were dead as well. I knew you were half Silent and also had to be... like me, at least a little bit. But you were so little! I didn't have any hope for you. I thought you were dead, and if I would only die too I would be back here, at home, and you would be waiting for me. So I did it, I killed myself." She smiled ruefully. "Just like Romeo and Juliet."

"But when you got here, I wasn't here," Harry finished.

"Yeah." She nodded. "That's when I realized the mistake I'd made. I'd lost that body, I couldn't get it back. And I could only return to the mortals if I started all over again, which wouldn't help. I could have come and brought you here, physically, but then you would have been just like me, and I wanted you to have that chance to live as I did." She looked around herself. "Being a Goddess can be very distant. Very alone. I wanted you to go to Hogwarts, to see and live everything. It was a hard choice." Lily touched his face gently.

She seemed to be waiting, watching him.

"I love Hogwarts, and Earth and Origin and the City... It's all wonderful. You made the right decision," he said, realizing that's what she really needed to hear.

"I'm glad." She nodded, wiping her face. "I then became the Goddess of Love... maybe I should be the Goddess of Lost Love? I don't know. But it was something I could be passionate about, something to do." A sly look came over her face. "I hope you enjoyed my gift."

"Gift?"

"You and Enna. I set that up. I didn't know if you would... fulfill the requirements completely, but... it worked." Lily looked proud.

Harry smiled. "It's wonderful... thank you." At the moment, thinking about Enna was painful. She felt so far away, and it was like part of him was missing. "Your mother said that Dad was... 'lost to us' when he died. What did she mean?"

Lily looked pained. "We bring mortals here occasionally to work for us, usually in the case of Cursed, because they can fly, they're strong, they can open portals, and live a long time. But nobody was calling James here when he was died, so he just... went on."

"But where do you go when you die?" Harry persisted.

"Intuition would know," Lily said. "But she doesn't tell anyone. All we know is that they never come back."

Author's Note:

OKAY EVERYONE. I always been annoyed by those authors that only updated when they got a certain amount of reviews, and I swore to never do that...

But I am literally offended! I put so much of myself in this story, and am getting no reviews for it. I know I can't make more people read or enjoy it, but that's not the issue at all. IF YOU READ 31 CHAPTERS and you are still here, leave a review!!! I'm speaking to about 700 people here!!!

I feel so inspired when I get reviews, and when I get none and the hits keep racking up I feel so unappreciated. I put hours into writing, and if you enjoyed my story it only takes a minute to review. If people don't start reviewing, then I'm going to have to do something like... sending the next chapter to the people who reviewed a week earlier than everyone else!

So... review please.

## Chapter Thirty-Two: Storm Leader

Harry held his mother's hand lightly in his own. They shared a smile before stepping back through the lavender door into the meeting room.

"How do you like Sky's End?" she asked.

"I haven't seen much of it," he replied, "It's a strange place."

She laughed. "That it is."

Instead of continuing to another door, Lily stopped near the middle of the room. Most of the floor was marble, but a circular portion of the middle appeared to be made of dark glass. She kneeled gracefully at its side, and gestured for Harry to join her.

She gave him an almost mischievous smile, and brushed her hand slightly over the edge of the glass. Surprisingly, it rippled like a pool of dark water.

Lush and I walked right over that spot before, and it was solid, then, he remembered.

"This is the Eye," Lily explained. "Our window to the mortal world. There are several ways to work it... the simplest, if someone down there prays to us and asks for an audience, they appear readily. Anyone with a blood relation, we can view easily, as well as anyone we have strong love for. Anything else takes quite a bit of power, and it's draining to hold contact. It's easier for the main Gods, but even they can't spy on the others, only on their own race and lands. Luckily, we've got a connection already made." She took Harry's hand again and held it up. "Yours with Enna."

The glass was clearing, becoming translucent, and faint images flickered across its surface. Leaning over, he peered right down and into the broad gray expanse of desert.

"I've viewed you like this many times," Lily said with a smile. "I was often surprised by what I found. Fighting dragons, going after Voldemort..."

Harry thought he might be blushing. "I'm a little reckless sometimes, maybe."

The ground of the desert sped by, as if they were flying, searching. Finally small figures came into view. "Look!" He exclaimed. "There they are!"

A massive buffalo trotted along with an easy gait. Ren bounced along with ease, straddling its back. Near the buffalo the centaur Miren ran fluidly. A few Silents dotted the sky above: Gray, Jon, and Vosenn.

The buffalo was hitched to a huge tented cart. In the front of the cart a few faces peered out at the land ahead. Enna and Sariah sat together, across from Ron and Hermione, Shetha and Thamn. Sitting on the back of the cart was Draco, looking out behind them, solitary. He looked deep in contemplation.

Lastly, a Bloodbeast Harry had never seen before was keeping up to pace next to the buffalo. His face turned to Ren and he appeared to be speaking to her.

Seeing Enna was like a knife twisting in his gut. "Can we hear what they're saying?" he asked.

"I can try," his mother said, and squinted in concentration.

Voices floated up from beneath them.

"I think you've got the hang of it," the Bloodbeast said.

Ren grinned at him. "You're flattering me. Bumbles is doing all the work, and she's going in a straight line anyway."

He shrugged. "She likes you. That helps."

Other than that, everyone was silent. There didn't seem to be much to talk about, their attitude implied that this scene was routine to them, and they were all focused on staying in motion. The scene faded away.

"They appear to be getting along well," Lily said brightly. "They're not dying in the desert or anything. That should be a weight off your mind."

"It is," he agreed. "What next?"

"We're going to go talk to the Sun Goddess," Lily said. She looked around the room, and settled on a narrow door that might have been painted with gold. A red sun was imprinted on the center, and the next door to the right was silver with a dark blue moon imprint.

"The Moon Goddess and I have always gotten along peaceably," Lily told him. "But the Sun Goddess sets my teeth on edge, and her daughter is even worse."

Lily knocked on the gold door. They waited for several minutes, and Lily's face was darkening with annoyance. The door finally swung open, and they stepped into the more elaborately decorated room Harry had ever seen. The floor was covered in thick red carpeting; the walls were covered with intricate murals and gold panels with complex inlaid designs. On a dais high in the center of the room was a tall throne with a woman on it. Her skin was shiny, almost glittery, and her eyes blazed light. Her hair, multicolored came out in all directions like sun-rays. Lily looked unimpressed.

"There appears to have been a mistake," she told the Sun Goddess. "You called my son to Sky's End. This shouldn't have been done without my consent."

The Sun Goddess smiled a vain, arrogant smile. "Don't be silly, dear. I don't make mistakes."

"Does my father know that you've done this?" Lily demanded.

"Your father," The Sun Goddess oozed, "Is not in Sky's End at the moment. But he's trusted me to take decisions when to call the Cursed Ones to us."

"He would never have allowed you to call Harry," Lily insisted. "He knows how I feel about Harry coming here before his time, and he respects my decision. Send him back."

"Send him back?" The Sun Goddess raised an eyebrow. "I don't send them back. I only call them here."

"But how do we phase him back into the mortal world?" Lily asked.

The Sun Goddess shrugged slightly. "How would I know?"

Lily shook her head, frustrated. "You're useless. Come on, Harry." She spun and turned to leave the throne room. Harry was turning to follow when he spotted someone behind the dais. Lush stepped out from behind her mother. She looked at him piercingly, and Harry quickly turned to leave. The way she looked at him made him uneasy.

"I sure hope my father is back," Lily said as the golden door closed behind them. "If the Sun Goddess isn't going to be any help, he's the only other one involved with the Silents that come here."

They moved on to the dark blue door. There were so many doors, but he was begging to make sense of them. The door was large and solid, impregnable. It opened as they approached, into a large entrance room, like the Sun Goddess had. There were more doors, but they moved straight ahead to the one directly across from the entrance, the largest.

Lily rested her hand on the second door. "Open," she said. The door quivered as if she'd pounded on it, responded as if wished to open. It stayed shut, shuddering as if locked. "Open," she repeated, and it reacted same as before.

"He must not be here," Lily said woefully. "Even though we don't spend much time together, the door recognizes me as his daughter and should open. It wouldn't lock unless he's gone."

"What do we do?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," she said bluntly. "We wait."

Harry sighed.

"Your friends are safe," his mother said soothingly. She touched his shoulder. "Is staying with me for a little while really that bad?"

"No," he acknowledged.

"We'll get you home as soon as possible," she promised.

"Alright," he said. Harry glanced around the room, fascinated. To the right of the large main door were two smaller ones, the first with a feather imprinted on it, the second one blank. On the wall next to them were a row of dark windows, and he crossed over to them. The first one looked out onto a panoramic view of the Mountains of Everdark, with the Pit Mountain centered in the middle. As he watched, small black dots flew out of the mountain, flying around. The second window was another familiar scene; it looked right into the Silent Queen's Hall.

"Will you meet me back in my mother's room once you've sated your curiosity?" Lily asked, and Harry nodded. She left back through the entrance door.

Harry leaned in closer, observing the figures crowded around the radiant Queen.

"So there you are," Someone abruptly said from behind Harry. He turned to see Etilon watching him.

"Hi," Harry said, having been too absorbed in watching to hear him enter the room.

"You're still here," Etilon pointed out. Harry shrugged. Etilon narrowed his eyes slightly. "I saw you talking to Luscious."

Harry nodded.

"She has a thing for me... I always catch her watching with those fiery eyes. One of these days..." He trailed off, a sly smile crossing his features.

Must be just a thing she does... Harry thought. He didn't mention to Etilon that she watched him the same way.

"This is how things work around here," Etilon continued. "This," he said, pointing to the main door, "is Dark Eye's door. It's off limits... though it doesn't open to anyone but him anyway." He pointed to the second door, the one with the feather. "This is my room. Also off limits." He pointed to the last remaining door. "These are the barracks, where the rest of you stay."

Etilon opened the door to show him. A long line of beds stretched down both walls, and between them were carefully kept, gleaming black sets of armor.

"What do you do here, exactly?" Harry asked, gesturing to the closest set of armor.

"We're The Black Storm," Etilon said.

Harry looked at him blankly.

"The Black Storm?" Etilon repeated, but Harry just shrugged. "The Black Storm is the vengeance of the Gods. If you anger them, a black storm obscures the sky and those offending are found dead, torn apart. Nobody knows it's an army of Cursed, they only see the storm. They can't see us unless they're meant to die, and nobody is ever left to share the truth. On Origin, they tell the story of The Black Storm to small children so they don't ever disrespect the Gods. We aren't sent out over trivial matters, of course. It has to be a major transgression." Etilon nodded at his own room. "I'm the Storm Leader. I'm in charge of training, and I'm the link between Dark Eyes and The Black Storm. I get my orders directly from him."

"That's fascinating," Harry admitted. "But I'm not sure if I'll be staying in the barracks."

"Why not?" Etilon asked.

Harry looked at Etilon thoughtfully. He kind of liked Etilon—the other Cursed had a quiet, commanding presence, but had been nice enough to Harry so far. "I really am here only for a short time, hopefully. As soon as Dark Eyes gets back, I'll be leaving. You see... he's my grandfather."

Etilon frowned. "Your grandfather." he repeated.

Harry walked up to Dark Eyes' door. He held out his hand like his mother had, and the door reacted the same, quivering, shaking, straining to open. "Yes, my mother is the daughter of Dark Eyes and MindRuin."

Etilon's expression didn't change. He looked at the door, then back at Harry. "Oh." He said finally, and turned and went into his room.

Harry frowned, uncomfortable with this reaction, and decided to leave.

He went to MindRuin's room to meet his mother, and the door opened for him. MindRuin... his grandmother... was sitting where he'd last seen her, and she smiled at him with her eyes, face hidden behind her veil. Lily sat next to her.

Harry sat across from them, and MindRuin looked back to her daughter. "Tell me, when is Harry going home?"

"He's not," Lily said, "Not until Father shows up."

"He's not there again, is he?" MindRuin shook her head. "Typical. Always lurking when you don't need him, and never there when you want to speak with him."

Harry was having very, very mixed feelings. I'm obligated to go back as soon as possible... not returning right away is a set-back, but it's also a reprieve from my responsibilities. Until Dark Eyes returns, I have to spend time with my mother. He felt guilty about it, but a part of him was pleased. The home of the Gods...

"I wanted to ask you," Harry said to his grandmother, "about Luminae. Enna and I wondered why a goddess would be sending her priestess to us."

MindRuin smiled again, the outer corners of her eyes turning up. "I was just watching out for you, I thought you could use some help."

Harry grinned. That had been her motivation— MindRuin kept an eye on her grandson. "Thank you, Grandmother," he said happily. "Though I have another, more serious question..." his expression became solemn. "The Ice Lizards. What are they? Who sent them?"

Lily and MindRuin looked at each other. Lily slowly shook her head, "I'm sorry, Harry, we don't know. You saw how The Eye works... we simply don't know what to look for."

"But which God created them?" Harry wondered.

"Maybe none," MindRuin said, and Harry looked at her quizzically. "There are so many worlds, Harry, and most of them were created long ago. One of the Gods could have made them, and forgotten about them, or made some little ice creatures that evolved into the ice lizards we've seen. There must have been an open portal on their world."

"What about the way they appear and disappear?" Harry asked. "They need a portal guide to do that, right?"

Lily shrugged. "Maybe, or maybe they are using other magic to make it look like portals are being made."

"The Ice Lizards don't seem that clever," Harry pointed out.

"Then there must be someone sending them, masterminding all of this," Lily said.

"Harry, there's something else you must understand," MindRuin told him, "The Gods don't always watch very closely, or care very much. They can't see everything that happens, and we can't make them believe that the Ice Lizards are a real threat."

Harry sighed.

“Sorry, Harry,” his grandmother said. “Some things are beyond my reach, even as a Goddess. We have rules of courtesy; we don’t interfere with other God’s business.”

“It’s okay,” he said, sadly, but he was feeling drowsy in his disappointment. If even the God’s don’t know, how do I have a chance against The Enemy?

“There’s nothing we can do right now,” his grandmother said soothingly. Harry slumped over on the couch, laying his head down. Lily and MindRuin murmured to each other, and the sound was encouraging his eyelids to close.

He didn’t actually fall asleep, or at least he didn’t think so. He hadn’t meant to nap, just close his eyes and think. As he was drawn down into sleep, something kept him from getting there. It was like he was surrounded by a crowd of people, all of them speaking at once, all of them with something to say. They didn’t speak very loudly, but urgently, leaving him with an overall feeling of anxiety and unrest. It wasn’t long before he shook his head to clear it and banish the voices from his head, and sat back up from the soft cradle of pillows to keep the veil of sleep at bay.

The two women noticed him shaking his head, and looked in his direction curiously.

“Is everything all right?” Lily asked him.

“Sorry,” Harry said, embarrassed to admit, “I’m... hearing voices, or something. I must be tired.”

They smiled.

“No, Harry, not voices,” MindRuin said. “People.”

“What people?” he asked.

"It's an effect of Sky's End," Lily explained. "It's a sign of your heritage. Gods don't need to sleep, but we do anyway, because it's a break from dealing with immediate concerns, and it gives us a chance to sort through the voices of the people who speak to us. It's something people do, more than they realize. They pray for help, or express thanks, sometimes not even aloud, but we hear it."

"But I don't have a 'people' like you do," Harry pointed out. "And I didn't understand anything they were saying, it was all a muddle, and they sounded unhappy."

"Simple, Harry," Lily said, but she didn't look as proud as she had a moment earlier, she looked concerned. "It's the people that need you. Understanding what they are saying is a skill you'll learn in time, if you decide to become a demi-god. You don't have time for that now, but maybe one day you will. It's not a good sign that they sound unhappy, it's even more proof that all isn't right on Origin."

A couple hours later, stomach growling with hunger, Harry headed for the dining hall. Stepping through the large bronze door, he saw a large number of Cursed at their table, but Etilon wasn't there. Harry took some food on a plate and took the same seat as last time. Some of the Cursed weren't eating but resting their heads down on the table, faces shining with sweat.

"I'm beat," one of them murmured, not having noticed Harry's arrival. "Completely beat. I'm going to go back to the barracks and sleep for a month."

"I don't think he's worked us that hard before, ever," Someone else said.

"That's what makes us the elite," said another. "We work hard... still, that was an extremely hard practice session."

Harry didn't have to ask who they meant. Etilon had mentioned that he was in charge of training.

Someone glanced over at Harry, and then did a double take. Hastily he put down his fork, and leaned over the table. "Harry, right?" he

said, very quietly. The rest of the table went silent, looking at him as well.

What have I done now? Harry wondered.

“Everyone’s been saying that you’re—“ He stopped mid sentence.

“I’m what?” Harry asked, but everyone seemed to be looking behind his back, and he turned to see. Etilon had entered the room, but he didn’t even look at the platters of food. He went straight for the Cursed table, and walking around it, sat across from Harry and regarded him silently.

“Hello Harry,” Etilon said.

“Hello,” Harry said, uncomfortable with the stares they were receiving.

“I want to tell you about something, Harry,” Etilon continued calmly. “You know that I’m the Storm Leader, right?”

“Yes.”

“And I have been, for a very long time. I fought the Storm Leader before me for the position, and I’ve been running things ever since. However, someone,” Etilon looked up and down the table piercingly, “Overheard The Green Lady telling the Double Sided God that you were the grandson of Dark Eyes and MindRuin. I certainly didn’t tell anyone, and I don’t think you did either, am I right? But it leaked anyway. Now people are saying that you should be the Storm Leader, that it’s your birthright.” Etilon’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t want to be Storm Leader,” Harry said firmly.

“It doesn’t matter what you want,” Etilon said. “That’s what everyone’s been saying. Not to my face, of course, but I hear them.”

“Etilon,” Harry said warningly. “Really, I don’t want any trouble. I’m going to be leaving as soon as my Grandfather returns. I can’t stay, and I definitely can’t be Storm Leader.”

"I really liked you, Harry," Etilon continued, as if he hadn't heard Harry's words. "I'm sorry I have to do this."

Harry barely had time to blink, and then Etilon grabbed his edge of the table and threw it up, throwing plates of food and full cups of water in all directions to splatter the ground. The table hit Harry in the chest, and knocked him over, pinning him momentarily until he threw the table off.

The whole room fell silent as everyone got to their feet to see the commotion.

"I'm not going to kill you," Etilon said confidently. "I just need to rough you up a bit so that people get the point. I have years of experience and training that you never had. It shouldn't hurt, Harry... much." He looked to his left, where another new addition to the crowd of Cursed stood, arms full. The other Cursed handed Etilon a black feathered item, which as Etilon placed on his head was revealed to be a stunning back headdress of Cursed feathers. Next, he handed Etilon and long, black sword, and a second one was offered to Harry.

"Here at Sky's End," Etilon explained, "We don't fight like animals as those down on Origin's surface do. Here we fight with dignity, and with swords."

"I've never fought with a sword before," Harry protested, and then anger bit him as he looked at the mess Etilon had made and all the attention he had drawn to them. "And I don't want to fight, just let it go."

Etilon didn't respond, just struck at Harry with his sword. Harry was forced to grab the other sword and swing it up to block Etilon clumsily. The crowd in the Dining Hall roared. The next few swings Harry was able to block accordingly, though sheer reflex and strength, and then Etilon came around his defense with lightning speed. Harry lunged back, and the sword whistled in front of his face.

"This is what should replace me?" Etilon demanded.

Harry blinked rapidly, seething with anger. He could feel his skin glowing with heat, the sword was like a brand in his hands.

"Going to become a wild animal, are you?" Etilon asked coolly.

Harry shook his head. How is Etilon staying so calm? Years of practice, most likely, or the influence of the home of the Gods. Why is it different for me? I thought I was getting so good at controlling myself, it's suddenly so hard...

Etilon swiftly attacked again, and Harry was forced to retreat further. Jumping backwards onto the next table, scattering more plates, Harry pulled a move Etilon hadn't been expecting, and hurled his sword at his opponent. It spun through the air and struck Etilon's sword arm, cutting it deeply. The Storm Leader stared at Harry, shocked.

Harry was breathing heavily, everything was blurring, but he still saw clearly enough how Etilon quickly recovered and picked up his sword with his other hand, swinging it through the air once to demonstrate how he was just as good with his other arm. Harry's sword lay beyond the fallen table, behind Etilon's back. Between it and Harry was Etilon's glinting blade, and as Harry had proved, the swords were razor sharp.

Harry stood frozen on the table, out of ideas. As Etilon attacked, Harry was unsure what to do until the very last moment. The shiny black sword whistled toward him, and at the very last second before it would hit Harry in the side Harry instinctive reached out and grabbed it by the blade.

Etilon blinked in surprise.

Blood oozed between his clenched fingers, but Harry's grip on the blade was firm. Before Etilon could do anything else, Harry pried the sword from his grasp and threw it to the ground, where it snapped in half from the force of the throw. He pushed Etilon with his hands, leaving a bloody imprint on one shoulder, and Etilon fell to the ground, looking up at Harry, dazed.

Growling fiercely and unaware that he was faintly glowing, Harry retreated from the room to collect himself. As he left, the crowd parted to let him through.

Back in the large circular room of doors, Harry knelt at The Eye. He touched it, and it rippled faintly, but try as he might, he couldn't get it to show what he wanted. Instead he went to Dark Eye's door, into the entrance room with the black windows, and lost himself in watching the Queen's Hall and the regular, mortal Silents. Harry thought that Queen Aeyris looked tired, and worried. He wasn't sure how long he was standing there, but it was along time before he felt calm again.

What now? Harry wondered. I defeated Etilon—unconventional as it was—and everyone's going to think I'm Storm Leader now. But I didn't want to be Storm Leader in the first place! I can't...represent the anger of the Gods! I can't train the warriors, I don't know how. What happens when I leave?

Harry sighed and left. First he went to his Grandmother's home, but Lily and MindRuin were no longer there. He went back to the Lavender colored door, and entered. At first he thought his mother's home was empty too, but then Lily entered from a side door, carrying a small platter of food.

"Hungry?" she asked. Harry nodded and sat at a table constructed entirely out of beautifully faceted glass.

"I heard what happened," Lily said, and smiled. "Storm Leader, huh?"

Harry shook his head. "I didn't want to be. I told him so..."

Lily stood behind him and gave him a warm hug, pressing the side of her face to his. "It will be alright," she said softly, and Harry found that he felt immensely better.

"My life is insane," he told her, and she laughed.

"Your life is extraordinary," she corrected. "For you are extraordinary."

"What now?" he asked once he had finished off everything on the plate.

His mother shrugged. "Whatever you want. You can stay here, though you may explore the Storm Leader's room in my father's home, and see what you find there. It's yours now, the room and its contents."

"What about Etilon?" Harry wondered.

"He fled, as is customary. He was disgraced."

Harry felt sad. Etilon had been trapped by tradition, and by pride. But it wasn't my fault, Harry assured himself.

The entrance room to Dark Eyes' home was empty as when he had left it, but he heard talking behind the door to the barracks. He realized that the others must have given him space to cool off before they came through. He stopped next to the door to listen.

"New Storm Leader!" Someone yelled. "I wonder what he'll be like?"

"He's a God." Someone said in an awed tone.

Harry shook his head and walked on. I'm not a God. I'm just... Harry. What I become is yet to be seen. My mother is probably right, that I was meant to live an extraordinary life. It's hard though... and what about all the people who are asking me for help? He didn't look forward to hearing their voices again, their needing of him.

The door with the feather imprint on it stood before him. As he opened it, he thought, I don't think I'll be staying here. I'd rather stay with my mother, and get to know her better.

Harry stepped through the door, and it closed behind him. He was surprised to see Lush, in all her stunning radiance, standing in the middle of the room. He was too surprised to sound annoyed when he asked, "What are you doing here?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Storm Leader, Harry? And so soon." She tossed her incredibly multicolored hair over her shoulder. "I'm impressed."

"What do you want?" he demanded, meaner than he would normally. I just want to be left alone.

Her eyes widened at him, and she winked. "You."

"What?" he asked, bewildered.

"Grandson of Dark Eyes, Leader of the Black Storm..." she tilted her head speculatively. "I think I'd like you."

"That's unfortunate for you," he told her.

"Not really," Lush said, and put her hands on her hips. "See, I always get what I want. I'm the Goddess of Desire... everything I desire is mine. Why do you think my mother called you?"

"You?" Harry exclaimed. "You were responsible for that?!"

"Think about it Harry," Lush said in a smooth, hypnotic voice. "You and I were meant to be together. We're of the same generation of Gods, if you will. It's not often Gods are born, and when we are, we're of a different caliber than the lesser Gods that are created. You and I are equally powerful; we're a match."

"I already have my match," Harry insisted, wishing he could back up more, but had already backed up against the wall. She and her conniving mother must have waited until Dark Eyes was going to be gone for a while, and set this all up! Because of her, Enna and Ron and Hermione are wandering around in Origin somewhere without me to protect them. "Leave," Harry said bluntly.

She pretended to think about it, mockingly. "No... I don't think so." She leaned toward him slightly. "You see, I have a fantasy," she whispered. "The Cursed have always intrigued me, but they are lowly, mortal beasts. You, on the other hand..."

She placed the palm of her hand on his chest and looked deep into his eyes. Harry didn't understand for a moment, but then everything began to blur away.

"You can't be serious—" he said, before everything went black.

### Chapter Thirty-Three: Forever Lost

"Halt!" The Wanderer suddenly yelled, and Bumbles slowly came to a stop. The Silents that were flying in the sky above came soaring down to see what the problem was, alarmed.

"What happened?" Vosenn demanded. Those riding the cart came to the front to peer out, and Miren veered over from where he had been running.

"No problem," the Wanderer said. "I just wanted to let everyone know that we just officially left the Everlight. We're now in the land of Fala."

Vosenn breathed a sigh of relief, and Jon cheered.

"There's a large town straight ahead," the Wanderer added.

Vosenn looked serious. "I suppose you'll be leaving us there," she said.

The Wanderer looked surprised. "I hadn't intended on it, no."

Vosenn raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were the great lone Wanderer? No offense, of course. We wouldn't have survived without your help. I'm just curious."

"It's true, I'm a loner by nature," the Wanderer shrugged. "I'm also a rebel. So I can break my own rules sometimes."

"So what do we do at the town?" Ren asked.

"We drive through. Get some supplies. Move on." The Wanderer looked to Vosenn. "What did you have in mind?"

"We just need to stay hidden. If you will have us, I think it's safest to stay with you, because then we can keep moving. No one can be allowed to see what we are, though. A varied group such as us, especially with Silents, would immediately draw too much attention, and alert our enemies."

"That's what the amulets are for," Sariah spoke up. As usual, she was at Enna's side.

"The amulets make us all look human," Gray explained to the Wanderer. "Silent magic."

"I have an idea," Sariah said. She reached into her pocket, pulling out a stone amulet. "When I collected all of Harry's feathers, I picked up his amulet too, he had thrown it down. So we have an extra one."

Everyone looked at the Wanderer. "What?" he asked.

"Your problem, people not trusting you because of what you are," Ren explained. "It can go away."

The Wanderer looked uneasy. "I don't know how I feel about... magic."

"Just try it this one time," Ren encouraged him.

Sariah held out the amulet, and slowly the Wanderer reached out and took it. He looked at Ren, who nodded. He put it around his neck, and then jumped nearly two feet in the air as his fur drew back into his skin and disappeared. His teeth shrank, his ears changed to human size and shape, and his claws retracted. He was still a large, strong looking human, but he definitely looked human, and uncomfortable.

Everyone else followed suit. Soon they were nothing more than an average looking group of humans, except for Miren who was naked, but they soon remedied that.

They climbed onto the cart, with the Wanderer and Ren riding Bumbles. Eventually they crossed an actual road, and turned onto it, the trot of the buffalo's hoofs thudding louder. The path made a turn and became wider, and ahead they could see the town. The desert around them faded as they neared the town, the ground becoming fertile dirt

People glanced up at them with interest, but only because of the rarity of a Sanaan buffalo in their part of the world. Nobody looked

twice at the Wanderer or any of his companions. He unloaded some of his wares and set out to do some trading, returning intermittently with food and supplies. The others explored the nearby area of town without venturing too far, except for Enna and Sariah who stayed on the cart, curtains drawn.

It was a very simple village, and everyone was too busy to take much notice of them. The day passed uneventfully, and in the early evening they set out again. Now that they were out of the desert and back to civilization, they didn't want to risk taking off their amulets, except for the Wanderer, who immediately ripped his off and handed it back to Sariah as if it burned him. His fur quickly grew back as his body reverted back to its natural Bloodbeast features.

"Something wrong?" Sariah asked.

"Yeah, how was it?" Ren wanted to know.

The Wanderer just shook his head. "I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"Why?" Vosenn asked. "Just because it's magical?"

"That's part of it," the Wanderer said. "But... it's just not me. What I am—a Bloodbeast—is the whole reason for how I am and who I've come to be. You can't change something like that."

Vosenn shrugged. "Your choice."

"I understand," Ren assured him. She continued, for his ears alone, "My entire life I've been considered handicapped, and people have treated me such. It shaped my personality, and when my cousin offered me an alternative way to fly, I refused it. I thought flying could never be a part of my life, it just didn't sit right with me." She shrugged. "In the end they convinced me to try it, and it turns out I'm excellent at flying and I enjoy it very much." She looked saddened. "Those were good times. We were all together and we thought we were safe. Harry was still there, and I had time to get to know him before he left us. I made new friends and I loved the school we were attending, it was wonderful. It ended much too soon."

As it got dark they made camp, building a warm fire and lying around it in a circle to sleep under the stars. Bugs' buzzing droned in the grass around them. A light breeze fanned the flames, but the weary travelers were warm.

Everyone was just nodding to sleep when Enna sat up with sudden gasp, as if she couldn't breathe, or was overcome with panic. They leapt to her immediately.

"Enna!" Sariah cried.

"What is it, Enna?" Vosenn asked. "Was it a dream?"

Enna just looked slightly dazed, as if she were looking right through them. She seemed very far away when she faintly murmured, "He's gone."

"What?" Ren asked.

"Harry's gone," Enna said. She sounded confused. "Just... gone. I think... I think he died."

They all stared at her aghast. Ever since Enna had proclaimed him alive, they had all held hopes that he would return to them.

Hermione gasped.

Ren felt tears rolling down her cheeks and she stumbled away from the heat of the fire, sitting down in the darkness some ways away to be alone.

She heard footsteps behind her. "Go away!" she yelled.

It was Gray, and he sat down next to her and pulled her into a hug. They embraced tightly.

"I'm upset too," Gray whispered. "Harry was a brother to me."

"Me too," Ren said. "I just want him back."

Back at the fire, Enna hid her face in her hands, and Sariah attempted to comfort her. Vosenn had gone completely white.

It was a more distant loss than when he had flown away, but somehow more final. The first time, they hadn't believed it. This time they'd had time to get used to the idea of Harry being gone and possibly dead, and there was nothing they could do but accept the fact and move on, otherwise the ice lizards would catch up to them.

Harry opened his eyes to a mostly unfamiliar room. The walls were stone, and everything was black. He was somewhere soft; a large plush velvet bed, surrounded with silky drapes that were partially closed. The rest of the curtains were torn down, shredded. Surrounding him were stacks of soft pillows, and next to him Lush was curled up like a cat. Naked. Her skin glowed with golden luminescence.

Harry leapt to his feet, but the bed was too soft and he could barely keep balance. Lush opened her eyes and looked up at him seductively. "Hello, Harry..." she said, and reached out to touch him, but he jumped away.

"WHERE AM I?!" he yelled, knowing the answer. "WHAT HAPPENED?!" he asked, knowing the answer to that one too.

Lush didn't reply except for an amused laugh. "Oh, calm yourself."

"No, I will not!" he insisted vehemently. "You... raped me," he realized, stunned.

She laughed harder. "Oh, Harry. That's not how it went at all... and no one is going to believe that." She arched her back, stretching. "It was better than my fantasy, by the way. You see, I like it rough, and I always wondered what it would be like with one such as you."

Harry wanted to scream with frustration. "Don't ever touch me again!!" He leapt off the bed, and set out looking for his clothes. Most of them were shredded too, as if he'd torn them off. He shook his head, disgusted. He found the largest scrap of curtain he saw and wrapped it around his waist.

"You may think you love that girl," Lush called after him. "But she's mortal, and you're a God. One day she will be gone and you'll come back to me."

"Never," Harry swore.

"Do you really think she'll take you back?" Lush asked. "I've taken care of that detail."

Realizing Enna's presence was gone was like a crushing blow to the stomach. He reached for her, but the connection they had had dissipated, leaving a deep emptiness. "You broke our bond... on purpose?" he asked, dazed.

"It was for your own good," Lush told him. "You don't belong with a mortal. The sooner you realize that, the better."

Harry finally found his pants, which were mostly whole, and was just putting them on, as the door slammed open.

Etilon stood in the doorway, disheveled. He glanced at Harry momentarily, but his eyes were quickly drawn to golden skinned Lush, still lounging naked on the bed. He stared, eyes wide.

"My room," Etilon said finally, stunned. "You and... and... her!" He was still wearing the feathered headdress. "You take my place, my title, my room... and now her too?!" He ripped the magnificent headdress from his head and hurled it down.

"Don't be silly," Lush said. "You and I could never have been together. I'm a Goddess."

"You're not helping!" Harry told her, exasperated.

Etilon's eyes blazed with fire, and he lunged at Harry. Harry had a split second to prepare himself, in which he thought 'Here we go again!' before Etilon slammed into him.

The floor dropped away from under Harry, and for a moment he was completely disoriented. Etilon's weight was dragging him down; wind

was blowing in heavy gusts around them. They were surrounded with stars, and there was no ground to be seen below them. Harry had to quickly unfurl his wings and flap them desperately to keep from falling.

"He ported us outside!" Harry exclaimed, but his words were lost in the wind. "Who's the wild animal now?" He yelled at Etilon, wondering if Etilon could hear him. Distorted by the wind and Etilon's own fury, the message might have not come across. Harry tore himself out of Etilon's grasp, and Etilon plummeted far below Harry before having the presence of mind to open his wings and fly. Eyes on his objective, Etilon sped back up.

What happened next was almost too fast for Harry himself to follow. They threw themselves at each other and wings and arms became a blur as they thrashed at each other ferociously, Harry fighting for his life and Etilon fighting out of crazed madness. The fight dragged on as they came together and broke apart in the air repeatedly. Etilon finally got an edge as he grabbed Harry from behind around the neck, tightening. Harry tried to cut him with his wingtips, but either Etilon didn't notice or wasn't in reach. Harry could do without breathing for some time, but the tightening muscles of Etilon's arms threatened to crush his neck and his windpipe entirely.

Desperately Harry leaned forward and did a flip in mid-air, Etilon let go slightly in surprise, enough for Harry to sling him off. As Etilon flew over his head, Harry reached out to grab him, taking a hold of Etilon's upper wing. Momentum and gravity carried Etilon forward and down, and the wing-bone snapped. Harry let go.

Etilon spun in mid-air, eyes wide and panicked as he looked back at Harry. For a moment he looked himself again, almost rueful. With one wing he could support his weight anymore, and plummeted downward. Harry hung breathlessly for a moment before realizing the right thing to do was to save Etilon and bring him back to Sky's End to be healed, then released. He peered downward into the darkness for his foe, and soared downward to find him, but Etilon was gone.

Miserable, Harry rotated, trying to find his bearings. Sure enough he could see the platform, the entrance to Sky's End in the gloom ahead of him. He flew toward it steadily, but then slowed as he neared.

On the platform stood a silhouette of a tall, dark figure. The figure stood absolutely still, and Harry got the feeling that whoever it was, had been watching the entire fight. The figure didn't move as Harry flew toward it, and so Harry dropped down to the platform and landed lightly in front of the figure.

It was a man, wearing a long dark cloak; he looked almost like a grim reaper. He seemed to be backlit, with a dark blue aura. His eyes, watching Harry steadily, were inky black. They stared at each other for a moment.

"So," said the man in a deep, rumbling voice. "This is my grandson."

"Dark Eyes," Harry breathed with awe. This was the God he had heard so much about, the one who had created the Silents, and the Cursed, who had started it all. The one who had stood over his cradle when he was a baby, and foretold his condition. "How did you know?" he asked.

Dark Eyes raised an eyebrow, nodding at Harry. Harry looked down at himself, surprised to see he was glowing violet, a hue somewhere closer to blue than purple. "Oh," Harry said.

Almost uninterestedly, Dark Eyes turned around and walked toward the ancient door. Without a break in stride he walked through as it opened for him, then across the room and through his own dark blue door. Harry followed as he crossed the entrance room, and then Dark Eyes own room opened as if it had never been locked, and they stepped inside. Harry wasn't sure whether he was supposed to follow, but he figured Dark Eyes would have told him to go away if he didn't want him there.

As they stepped through the door, a blue fire burst into flames in the fireplace in the middle of a room filled with lots of black and silver shining surfaces, dark wooden furniture. It was shaped like a pentagon built out of glass panes, through which the night sky could be seen. Next to the fire was a single large armchair, which Dark Eyes sunk into, pulling down his hood. Harry looked at his features for a few seconds: straight black hair, nearly to his shoulders, a

straight, royal looking nose, inky black eyes, and prominent cheekbones. He was simply powerful looking. Harry wondered if he would look anything like him one day.

Dark Eyes didn't say anything, so Harry walked to the window and looked out, gazing into the stars. His blue-violet glow had diminished slightly but still persisted on the surface of his skin. This reminded him of everything Luscious had said... You're a God, you don't belong with a mortal... and the loss of his beloved Enna. Will I ever get her back? Harry wondered sadly. He glanced over his shoulder. Dark Eyes hadn't moved, but sat watching Harry calmly.

As Harry looked back at him questioningly, Dark Eyes smiled slightly. "Forgive me for staring. I was thinking... I just realized something for the first time."

"And what is that?" Harry asked.

Dark Eyes shook his head. "Not yet. One day I'll tell you."

Harry sighed, disappointed but resigned. Nothing is ever that easy. "What now?" Harry asked. "I need to return to Origin, my friends need me."

"It will be done." Dark Eyes said.

"I'm supposed to be Storm Leader, I guess. What about that?"

Dark Eyes shrugged. "The Black Storm can do without a Storm Leader. They know how to train, tell them to go on as usual. They won't be needed for some time."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Go now," Dark Eyes told him. "Give the Black Storm their instructions, and say goodbye to your mother, for she has missed you greatly, and the silly woman with the veil. When you're done, go back to the entrance to Sky's End and fly down. As you descend to the surface of Origin, I will make sure that you phase back into the mortal plane."

"Can I ask where you've been?" Harry asked.

"You can ask, but I'm not going to tell you," Dark Eyes said.

"But the Ice Lizards, The Enemy—"

"Go now."

Harry left.

When he opened the door to the barracks, the boisterous Storm warriors fell silent in expectation.

Harry cleared his throat. "Hello everyone. As many of you overheard, I was telling Etilon that I didn't want to be Storm Leader, and that I wasn't staying in Sky's End. Etilon didn't take this into consideration because it never occurred to him that he could lose, that I would end up as Storm Leader. I have responsibilities on Origin I must take care of immediately. I was entrusted the care of basically all the royal heirs of Origin, and when I was called I had to leave them to fend for themselves." Some people looked alarmed at this. "But I'm leaving now. I've spoken with Dark Eyes and he says you won't be needed for a while. I want you to continue training as usual. I trust your pride as the elite warriors you are will keep your level of training up. Goodbye, I expect we'll meet again someday."

Harry turned around and left. I think that went pretty well.

He went to MindRuin's room first, and was lucky to find both MindRuin and Lily there.

They looked surprised by his appearance, and Harry glanced down and realized he was wearing only shredded pants and was covered in cuts and scratches from the most recent fight with Etilon. He shrugged.

"Dark Eyes is back," Harry announced. "He says I can leave immediately."

"So soon?" Lily's face fell for a second, but then she smiled. "I know it's necessary. Come back to me one day, Harry."

He walked forward, and they shared a big hug that lasted a few long, wonderful seconds.

She stepped back, looking at him closely. "Something's different about you," she said.

Inside, Harry felt crushed. He knew he should ask her if he could fix his broken bond with Enna, but he was too embarrassed by what had happened. He didn't want Lily to know he had destroyed her gift. His thoughts went to Enna for a second. What is she thinking? He wondered.

"You're glowing slightly," Lily finally identified, but she didn't sound sure.

Harry nodded. "That must be it," he said.

MindRuin embraced him as well. "Good luck, Harry," she said. "One day we'll have time to get to know each other better."

"Goodbye," Harry said, sad, but eager to be on his way.

"I love you!" his mother called as he left, and he turned quickly to flash a grin.

Then he hurried to the door to outside, stepped out onto the platform and into the crisp night air. At the edge he unfurled his wings and surrendered himself to the wind, floating gently downward in caressing air currents, but in his mind's eye all he could see was Etilon plummeting to his death.

## Chapter Thirty-Four: Not So Dead

The empty gray desert sped by below Harry. The rising heat from below encouraged him onward, keeping him moving. What an uncomfortable place, he thought, looking at its ugliness. My poor friends... and who was that Bloodbeast?

He had stopped glowing after leaving Sky's End, and he felt drained, as if the need for sleep had intensified for him.

He tried to reach for Enna, but it was like confidently leaning on something that you expect to be there, and falling. With a forlorn sigh, Harry picked up his casting stone from his chest, where it still hung with his curved Bloodbeast claw.

"Find Ren and Gray," he whispered to it. It would be easier for it to find Ren and Gray, with their own casting stones, than to find the others. A silver line appeared in the air in front of him, stretching out across the sky. He followed it.

He flew for hours and hours, but it was the strangest thing—the day never seemed to end. Evening never came, and night never fell. The whole desert remained in its same state of hot, dry, grayness. Then suddenly the desert ended, and behind him there was a stunning sunset. He flew on, over a large town and many grassy fields and hills. The number of trees increased, but it was a land in limbo, between the grassy fields and what could be called a forest.

He saw the shaggy creature first, standing imposingly between the trees with its long cart. The Bloodbeast standing next to it was unhitching it from the cart, and there were some of the others standing about, but he didn't see Enna.

He began to circle down.

A day had passed since Harry's death, and Enna had collapsed into the cart the entire time. The Wanderer was feeling sorry for his traveling companions and friends; they were all so hopelessly sad over his death. Except for Draco, who seemed more upset by Vosenn's misery than Harry's death itself.

The Wanderer had just released Bumbles from her harness, and was the first to notice the shadow. It was getting darker by the minute, but a shadow was circling around them, getting larger. He squinted up into the growing dusk, and saw something with black wings descending on them.

The Wanderer isn't one to panic lightly. He wondered, for a second, whether they were under attack, and then it became clear that it was a Silent, and he wasn't diving, just floating down. He looked somewhat familiar; it took the Wanderer only moments to come to the conclusion that this Silent greatly resembled Gray. "Look up," the Wanderer said.

They all looked up, in time to see a dark shape coming down at them to land just ahead of where they stood.

It was Harry. He was bare-chested, and his simple black pants were shredded; he was battered and covered with cuts and scratches and dried blood. His disheveled hair stuck up more than usual.

Everyone stared in wordless shock. They stood frozen.

"Harry?" Vosenn gasped.

So this is the Harry I've heard so much about, the Wanderer thought. Not so dead looking, if you ask me.

"Oh, Dark Eyes, Harry, Where have you been?" Ren cried. "We thought you were dead!"

"The Sunsickness," Vosenn asked. "What was it? Where did you go?"

Hermione said simply, "Oh Harry!" at a loss for how to express what it felt like to see him alive.

None of them knew what to think—they had been mourning him, and now he was back. He didn't look too good, and he was pale and quiet, but alive.

Sariah and Enna must have heard from the cart, for it was then that Enna came back to life. She sprung out of the back of the cart as if she had been hit with a volt of electricity, and marched over. Pushing between the others standing around in silent awe, she stepped up to him and shoved him as if she could push him away. He took a step back in surprise.

“You!” She cried. “Alive!”

“Yes,” Harry said, as if sorry for it.

“I’ve been a pitiful mess and you... you just come flying back in! I thought you were dead, Harry!” She balled her hands into fists. “I knew there was something funny about the way our bond ended. It was as if I could sense something, right before...”

“Enna,” Harry said urgently. “Let me explain. You’ll never believe where I’ve been, I’ve been somewhere wonderful, let me tell you about it—“

“I don’t want to hear about it!” she cut him off. “You cheated on me!“

“Please, Enna—“

“NO!”

Enna spun around and marched back to the cart, getting inside and closing the curtain.

“Enna?” Sariah asked, standing beside the cart.

“Leave me alone!” Enna yelled.

The others (with the exception of the Wanderer, who had tactfully stepped backward) looked incredulously at Harry.

“That’s why she thought you were dead,” Ren said in amazement. “You weren’t faithful to her, and it broke your connection.”

Harry shook his head. “It wasn’t like that, I didn’t mean to...”

"But you did!" Enna yelled from inside the cart. "Just go away Harry, we don't need you anymore."

"Enna..." Harry pleaded.

Overcome with anger, Enna continued. "Did it ever occur to anyone that it's Harry's fault that we got kicked out of Hogwarts? We were safe there, and happy, and it was because of Harry that the Otherworld Control and the Ice Lizards found us! If Harry hadn't ported around so much, we would never have ended up abandoned in that terrible desert!"

"Harry didn't know," Hermione quickly defended him.

But Harry knew it was true, true in the way guilt had been eating at him every time his beloved Hogwarts came to mind. He was supposed to have been protecting them, and he had led the enemy right into his home.

Harry promptly whirled around and ripped up the nearest tree, a thick trunk that must have been fifteen feet tall, and broke it into several pieces. He left them then, walking away and out of sight. They knew he was there though, because they could hear him raging nearby, the sounds of growls and trees cracking.

"Um... Harry's gone," Ren commented, in both senses of the word: gone from them, and gone from his mind.

"Should we go get him?" Jon asked skeptically, looking in the direction that Harry had left.

Vosenn considered this. "What could we possibly say to him? I think he needs to work it out. I say we stay alert, make sure he doesn't stray too far, and doesn't come back and hurt anyone."

"If he thinks it's his fault that we were found, and he really cheated on Enna, the guilt must be eating him alive," Ren said.

"I don't think Harry would have done that!" Shetha protested. "Harry is good!"

Ren patted her hair gently. "I don't think so either, but we don't know until he calms down and explains it to us."

"I don't think Enna should have said that, about Hogwarts being Harry's fault," Hermione said. "Now look what's happened."

Sariah shook her head. "I think Enna can be excused from blame; the love of her life died and she mourned him, only to find out he was actually alive and had cheated on her. Let's leave her alone, too."

They resignedly sat down around the fire to wait it out.

It was dawn by the time Harry calmed down and slunk back to them. Many of them had fallen asleep, slumped over next to the fire with blankets thrown over them. Vosenn, Jon, Sariah, Gray, Ren, and the Wanderer hadn't slept at all, they had listened while the sounds of Harry's raging had lessened until they stopped entirely and he quietly returned.

He was tense still, and the occasional flicker of flame in his eyes betrayed his mood.

"Harry... where were you?" Vosenn asked him finally.

Harry hesitated, and then shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it," he said.

They exchanged glances, and decided not to push the question. They assumed he would tell them later, when he was back in his right mind.

What they didn't know was that Harry had just decided not to tell them, not now and not later.

I don't want to tell them about my heritage. They would never see me as just Harry ever again... they would expect miracles from me, things I can't give. They would expect the Gods to help us, and I would have to explain the Gods either don't know or don't care, and

that wouldn't help our current situation whatsoever. Eventually I would get to how and why I was called there, and to Lush, and I DEFINITELY don't want to talk about that. It's better to just keep my mouth shut.

The sun was rising, so Vosenn asked him, "Is there any chance that you could catch the sun-sickness again?"

Anger flared in Harry's eyes, and he resolutely said, "No. There is no way that's ever going to happen again."

Again they were silent— they wanted to know whether he had actually cheated on Enna or not, and nobody wanted to ask and risk setting him off again.

If he had been weary when he flew back to them last night; that was nothing compared to now. Every bit of energy he'd had left was now expended, and he lay down and joined the others slumbering on the ground.

Enna hadn't sleep that night either. First she sobbed into a pillow, and then she quietly listened to the sounds of Harry in the woods, miserable. She loved him so very much, and he may be back but he was still gone from her. Their bond couldn't be patched, and there was nothing he could do to ever apologize for what he had done. He knew very well that by cheating on me, he would break the bond, she reasoned. He wouldn't have broken it if he still wanted to be with me. The Harry I loved is gone.

She peeked through the curtains and watched at dawn when Harry returned to the others, listening to their conversation. He looked so weary and defeated, she wished she could reach out and touch him, heal his wounds and scratches. Unable to bear his presence, unable to watch or listen any longer and needing to get away, she crawled through the front of the cart, on the other side of the campfire. She passed Bumbles who was settled by a nearby tree, and walked off into the fields. Circling around, she found the area of land Harry had destroyed, and sat in the middle of one of many large craters, tucking her feet under her and wrapping her cloak around herself.

Oh, Harry, she thought woefully.

As the daylight grew steadily brighter, the birds woke and twittered around her. A small flock of birds circled the clearing, and she watched their tiny bodies fly through the air. Some landed in front of her, and she couldn't help but smile. They were very tiny and different shades of brown, except one which was white. They were just so sweet and innocent; it brightened her mood to see them fly around so freely.

"Hello," she said to them, and they looked at her, surprised.

"It wasn't I who made this mess," she told them, nodding at the craters. "He's made a mess of a lot of things," Enna murmured.

One of the birds hopped forward curiously, the white one.

"I'm so sad, little bird," she told the bird. "My heart is broken."

The bird peeped.

"I love someone, but he left me, he must not have wanted me anymore," she then added, "He tore down these lovely trees, too."

The bird looked sympathetic, or at least Enna liked to imagine so.

She held out her hand and the tiny white bird hopped onto it. Carefully she pulled her hand back to herself, but it stayed there, perched. "Sweet darling," she murmured to it.

Enna got to her feet and turned around just to see the Wanderer navigating his way toward her in the grass. He was so stealthy, his steps were silent.

He raised an eyebrow at her and her little friend. "What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Are the others looking for me?" she wondered.

The Wanderer shook his head. "No. Bumbles was stomping her feet a bit, and she only does that when people are near her, so I went to go investigate. I didn't tell the others, and when I checked and saw you were gone, I thought you might have wanted some distance and I came looking for you myself. I doubt you want a fuss made about it."

Enna shook her head.

The Wanderer looked uncomfortable. "You know... I can't imagine what you're going through, but... for what it's worth, I'm sorry." Quickly he continued, "Well, they're kind of waking up now, and somebody is going to go look for you in the cart sometime soon, so why don't you sneak back in and we can pretend it didn't happen, if you like."

Enna nodded gratefully. She followed the Wanderer, and expected the bird to fly off back to the flock, but it stayed with her. When she climbed into the cart it flew into the air and then settled down on her shoulder. Its presence comforted her. She no longer felt so alone.

Harry slept deeply and well. The anxious half-sleep he had experienced at Sky's End had left him, but as he woke up he had the lingering memory of dreams, though they were gone by the time he had opened his eyes. The camp was packing up, carefully navigating around his sleeping form. They noticed him sitting up, but nobody said anything to him. He rose to help, but there wasn't much for him to do.

Surprising everyone slightly, the Bloodbeast Harry had yet to meet marched right through the others and approached him. When he spoke, it was at a volume that none of the others could hear unless they came closer than they were.

"I'm called the Wanderer," the Bloodbeast said. "I've been traveling with your group these weeks since the day after you left them. They were lost in the desert, and I came by with Bumbles and the cart. I just couldn't leave them to die there, so I took them along."

Harry nodded. "Thank you. I owe you a lot, then." He frowned. "Weeks?"

"Yeah..." The Wanderer said.

Harry groaned. "I didn't know it was weeks."

"Where have you been?" The Wanderer asked.

Harry just shook his head.

"I've heard some of what's happened to you all, but certainly not all of it, and I don't know the full story. I did hear, however, about the Bloodbeast who betrayed you, and I wanted to assure you I'm not your average Bloodbeast. I've grown fond of this bunch, and I wouldn't do anything to hurt them. Perhaps we can protect them together?"

"Forgive me for not trusting you right away," Harry said. "You appear honest, and I do hope you mean what you say, but I will keep my guard up. We may stay as a group, through. Are you headed anywhere?"

The Wanderer shook his head. "Nope. That's why I'm called the Wanderer." The Wanderer looked at Harry levelly and without fear, and Harry wondered what he was thinking.

"Let's move on, then," The Wanderer called, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Now that they were out of the desert, and no long in a hurry to escape it, most of them went on foot. The going was slow, and comfortable. The cart was open, and a slight breeze went through its space, where Enna could be seen sitting with a strange, small white bird that had appeared with her that morning. She talked to it sometimes; they could see her lips moving.

The Wanderer led the way, and Harry was at the very back, trailing the group at a distance.

Ron and Hermione walked together, hand in hand.

Hermione sighed. "This is all so sad," she said.

Ron nodded, and looked over his shoulder at Harry. “I wish we could go talk to him.”

“I think he wants to be left alone right now,” Hermione said, and Ron agreed.

Draco left Vosenn’s side where he had been walking ahead of them, and stood, waiting for them to catch up. They glanced at each other in shared surprise— Draco and they had each been pretending the other didn’t exist. There wasn’t any enmity there; they just didn’t know how to deal with each other. They had formerly been enemies, and there were too many bad experiences, but now they were on the same side, caring for the same people. Draco had gotten used to the fact that his girlfriend wasn’t human, and seemed even more devoted to her, if possible.

“Hello.” Draco said as they caught up, and he fell into step next to them.

“Er, hi,” Ron and Hermione said together.

There was an awkward silence.

“So...” Draco said. “Here we are, on Origin on our own with no other humans; only you two, from Hogwarts. I’d never have believed it.”

“Us either,” Ron said cautiously, wondering what Draco was getting at.

“I was wondering what you two were going to do, now that Harry’s back,” Draco said.

Hermione nodded. “That’s right! We’re no longer stuck... we wouldn’t be able to do it right away, probably, but we now have a way back.”

“Are you going to take it?” Ron asked Draco.

Draco shook his head. “I’m not going back.”

“Why not?” Hermione asked.

Draco looked pained. “Because... because my father wanted me to join the Death Eaters,” he divulged uncomfortably. “He’s never going to take no for an answer. Besides, I have Vosenn now, and she says it’s not unheard of for humans to live in the Pit with Silents. Like Potter’s mother and Ren’s mother.”

“You might as well call him Harry now that we know that Potter wasn’t his real name anyway,” Hermione pointed out.

“Right. Harry.” Draco shrugged. “What about you two?”

Hermione and Ron had each thought about it themselves, but hadn’t talked it over yet.

“Wherever we go, we’re staying together,” Hermione said as a way of avoiding the question.

Draco glanced at their joined hands. “So that’s how it is.”

“We might still be needed,” Ron said. “We’re not going to leave and let you have all the fun, Draco.”

“You call this fun?” Draco looked skeptical. “We just follow them. Face it; we’re not going to be any help. That’s why none of the other races are that impressed with humans. We can’t fly, or run fast, or claw anyone.”

“We have our wands,” Hermione pointed out.

“True,” Draco said. “But I’m certainly not feeling particularly useful at the moment.”

“No one is,” Hermione said. “We’re in hiding.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, glancing over his shoulder at the sullen Harry. “As soon as Harry is feeling better, we’re going to talk to him. We’re not going to be hiding forever, and who knows, they might need us then.”

Draco didn’t look convinced, but they walked together companionably a while before he joined Vosenn.

## Chapter Thirty-Five: Dowse Effect

Her little adventure that morning had been quite enough fresh air for Enna that day, so she soon pulled the curtains on the cart shut and curled up with a blanket and her tiny white bird, which she named Darling. Darling was all the company she needed.

They continued their moseying pace all morning, and at midday they stopped and made another fire. The Wanderer set up some sturdy sticks and hung a pot over it, and Ren, Sariah and Shetha helped him cut up some meat and vegetables into small pieces, food he had traded from the town they'd passed through two days before. It made a goulash of sorts, and they all sat down around the pot, waiting for it to finish cooking.

The smell of the food lured Enna out of the cart and she kneeled on the ground beside Sariah with Darling on her shoulder, eyes stuck to the ground. She was biting her lip fiercely.

On the opposite side of the fire, Harry stood back a little bit, simmering just as much as the soup. He was so agitated that everyone became concerned.

"You." Ren told him. "Sit." He sat down obligingly and she tried to rub his neck and shoulders and relax him a bit, but it scarcely made a difference.

Everyone observed this glumly.

"I have a theory," Gray said suddenly. They looked to him and he hesitated. "It makes sense, but..." He glanced at Harry and Enna.

"What is it?" Vosenn asked him.

"Before Harry and Enna were bonded, Enna would hardly leave her room and Harry was frankly... dangerous. Then they had the mind-sharing, and Enna grew more and more confident while Harry became calmer. My theory is that when they were bonded they balanced each other out: Enna's presence calmed Harry, and Enna herself drew courage from him. Now that the link is gone Enna has

gone back to the way she was before, and Harry is having trouble controlling his emotions.”

Hermione was nodding. “They needed each other,” she agreed.

“Amazing!” Jon said.

Vosenn looked quite stunned. “It got better over time, too...” she realized. “That could mean...”

“Eventually we both would have been quite stable and self sufficient,” Harry finished. “I get it. But now it’s too late, isn’t it.” It wasn’t a question.

For a second Enna looked like she was going to say something, probably along the lines of, ‘I bet you wish you hadn’t broken the link, huh?’ but she quickly squashed it and drew back into her shell.

In that moment of silence, they heard an animal running through the underbrush nearby, and a flock of birds fluttered overhead. Bumbles looked over her shoulder into the trees almost quizzically.

“Is there someone there?” Vosenn called.

The Wanderer shook his head. “Probably just an animal, if it were a person Bumbles would have notified me.”

He was proved wrong a moment later, when a figure appeared in between the trees. Bumbles still didn’t react.

“That’s because,” said a melodious female voice, “To her, I smell like a plant.”

The Hand got to their feet.

“Who are you?” Vosenn asked, sounding more confused than demanding.

Shetha and Thamn quickly leapt to their feet and sprinted towards the figure throwing themselves at her just as she stepped into the light. It

was a short female Vineadryad with a most magnificent crown of varied flowers and vines growing from her head. She was dressed simply, just as all the other Vineadryads Harry had seen, but there was something in her demeanor that marked her as someone special.

“Spring-Bringer!” Shetha said with awe.

The Spring-Bringer gathered the twins into a hug, and then stepped forward to the others at the fire. “I am the Vineadryad Spring-Bringer,” she told Vosenn.

“The most amazing Vineadryad ever!” Shetha insisted. “I’m going to be just like her one day,” she said to Thamn, who nodded agreeably.

Miren then got to his knees reverently, and gave the Spring-Bringer a nod. The other’s glanced at him uncertainly, then back to the Vineadryad.

“What brings you to us, Spring-Bringer?” Vosenn asked.

“I was recently informed of events that have been occurring,” the Spring-Bringer told them, “The attacks of the Ice Lizards and your flight from them. I must thank you for taking care of these little ones.” She looked to the twins, then less optimistically continued, “However everyone who sent children to Earth with you was told of the attack of the Ice Lizards there, and how you disappeared into a portal, and hadn’t been heard from since. Now several weeks have passed in which no one knew your whereabouts, and they were getting concerned. Then, a couple days ago, they all received messages carried by Ice Lizards, telling them that you had been captured and would be hurt if they didn’t comply.”

“What?”

“No!”

“Even the Earth people were threatened with the harming of their students. They were told that the Ice Lizards had you all, and with no word for several weeks, it was plausibly true. They have been in a panic. I’m very glad to see you all safe and well.”

"That is so unfair!" Jon protested. "We've been so successful in keeping ourselves in hiding."

"And the Enemy takes advantage of it," Harry added.

"How did you find us?" Gray wondered.

The Vineadryad smiled. "I'm the Spring-Bringer," she said simply. "The trees told me."

Everyone considered that for a moment, impressed. The whole of Origin where they could possibly be or not be, and the Spring-Bringer could find them just because they were in a semi-forest.

"So it doesn't make a difference whether we're actually caught or not," Vosenn said. "The Enemy is using us as hostages either way. We need to get to the Pit and tell Queen Aeyris. She can quickly send messengers to the others."

"Yes," Sariah agreed.

"Harry?" Vosenn asked the unspoken question, looking to Harry, who nodded. She then turned to the Wanderer. "Thank you for everything. We are in your debt, friend."

"I guess our ways part here," Ren told him, and he nodded.

"Good luck," he told them all.

"Everyone, you need to be in contact with Harry," Vosenn ordered, then sent a specific look at Enna.

They all crowded around Harry, reaching to touch his shoulders and arms. Enna's tentative hand felt small and cold.

He closed his eyes, and imagined the Queen's Hall as well as he had last seen it in Dark Eye's window, and a few seconds they found themselves transported directly in front of the dais, where Aeyris sat,

anguished. All of the people in the Queen's Hall gasped, and she glanced up in surprise.

"We weren't captured!" Vosenn told her. "It was a lie!"

Relief flooded the Queen's face. "Enna!" she said. Enna ran to her mother and they hugged, it was the most emotion Harry had ever seen from the Queen. The little bird had to fly about in the air until it landed on Sariah.

Madalena was there, too. "We've been putting magical reinforcements up," she said. "It's safer here than it was before, so you can stay here a little while, especially since nobody could have seen you come in." She then frowned, looking at Harry. "You keep porting in here... how is that possible?"

Harry just shrugged, but thought it over himself. I suppose it's kind of like the doors in Sky's End... I'm recognized as family so I can pass through the barrier Dark Eyes put up to keep people from porting into the Pit. The same with the mermaid's Secret Grotto, it's protected by the power of MindRuin, my grandmother. I must have a part of each of their power, even if I can't access it.

Harry wasn't sure how to feel about that— it made him slightly uncomfortable.

"Where have you all been since you dropped off the map?" Queen Aeyris asked.

"Well," Jon said. "We dove through that portal at Hogwarts and ended up back on Origin, in a desert... then, um... we lost Harry and were rescued by a Bloodbeast with a buffalo and a cart..."

"Excuse me?" Aeyris repeated. "You lost Harry?"

"What does that mean?" Madalena asked.

"After we went through the portal, he promptly caught the Sun-sickness," Vosenn explained.

They looked at Harry. "But... he came back?" Madalena said.

Jon nodded. "A few weeks later, yeah, but we knew he wasn't dead..." again Jon stopped, not sure how to explain.

"Aunt, could you explain the Sharing to the Queen?" Gray asked Madalena, who stepped up next to the Queen's throne.

They could only hear parts of what she was saying. "...compatible... sharing thoughts... can only be broken if..."

Aeyris turned white, gritting her teeth. She glared piercingly at Harry. "You two did WHAT!"

Everyone in the Queen's Hall took a large step back, alarmed by the tone of her voice and the murderous expression on her face.

"Er..." Harry said, and thought he might be turning red. It was her idea, he wanted to protest.

"I appoint you to guard my daughter... and you..." Aeyris seemed unable to express herself and gave up, just saying, "YOU!"

Harry shook his head, annoyed with how she immediately assumed it was his fault. "It wasn't like that!" he said angrily.

"They're not bonded anymore anyway," Sariah said. "So just forget about it."

"And then he came back..." Vosenn continued.

Aeyris interrupted her by getting to her feet. "HOLD IT," She yelled, and everyone fell silent. "Not only do you have... a relationship with my daughter, The Princess, which was extremely inappropriate, but you then have the nerve to be unfaithful to her as well!" She shook her head fervently, hair flying in all directions. "How DARE you!"

At which point Harry lost his temper.

“STOP TALKING ABOUT THINGS YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT!” He yelled back. “Nobody trusts me, or even gives me the benefit of the doubt! YOU!” He looked pointedly at Enna. “YOU don’t even give me a chance to explain myself. None of you know what I’ve been through, or how hard it was to come back, the sacrifice I made for you! I could have left this whole mess behind, but I came back because I care about you and I take care of my responsibilities!” He was shaking with anger. “Stop putting all the blame on me!”

Aeyris looked taken aback, and everyone else was stunned.

Harry, unable to stop himself now, glared with his glowing fiery eyes before slamming a fist into the stone floor, leaving a small hole with cracks spreading from it. He snarled and took a step toward the Queen, just as Vosenn stepped in his way.

“Stop, Harry!” She cried urgently. He tried to focus on her and understand what she was saying, but his vision was too distorted and everything sounded as if from a far distance. He gave up trying to fight for control.

Vosenn saw that in his eyes, and reached into the front of her cloak, ripping a thin chain from around her neck. Hanging from it was a double sided container, similar to the shape of a clam, clasped shut. She undid the clasp with her thumb and thrust her hand at Harry just as the container flipped open, blowing dust into his face.

All of a sudden, Harry felt completely calm. He blinked at her, surprised.

Vosenn looked horrified, and Harry wondered why Vosenn would have such an expression on her face, when icy daggers of pain ripped into him.

“Oh Harry, I’m so sorry,” Vosenn pleaded.

Harry was then surprised to find himself looking up at everyone from the floor, where he seemed to have fallen on his back, but he couldn’t remember doing so.

"I think you may have overdone it," Jon commented.

"Yes," Vosenn said simply.

"What was that, Ice Powder?" Gray asked. "Like when he fought that other Cursed?"

Vosenn shook her head. "No. I didn't have time to make Ice Powder. That was a concentrated amount of Dowse... Dowse is the most important ingredient in Ice Powder, but you only use a minuscule amount." She seemed ashamed as she revealed, "As you know, all Hand Leaders take specific classes at the Academy, one in which we are instructed about Dowse. All Leaders carry a small concentrated amount with them, just in case. We don't use it, because there aren't as many Cursed as there used to be; many of them just give up hope, in the Keep, and Cursed for all they are feared are very valuable... but not as valuable as the Queen, the single most important person of all Silent society. We are instructed to use the Dowse, no matter what personal loyalties or affection we feel for our Cursed, if the Queen is threatened."

The painful icy feeling didn't fade, as it had with the Ice Powder, but grew stronger, biting deeper. Harry gasped, and they all kneeled to peer closer at him, concerned.

"So what does it do?" Ren demanded.

"It puts out Wrath's flame," Vosenn said.

"Huh?" Hermione asked. "Does that mean he's not a Portal Guide any more?"

"Unfortunately, the entire physiology of the Cursed revolves around the fire," Vosenn said bluntly. "Without it, their body ceases to function and shuts down."

"He dies," Gray translated. He grabbed Vosenn by the shoulders. "You killed Harry!"

For the first time any of them had ever seen, Vosenn was crying. "I'm so sorry," she said weakly. "I had to."

Harry was only vaguely aware of what they were talking about, but he had caught the part where Gray had yelled, accusing Vosenn of killing him.

I'm dying? He wondered.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Ren cried desperately.

"No," Vosenn said. "We can keep him warm, but he won't last long. A couple hours, a day maybe."

"Oh Dark Eyes!" Sariah swore.

Enna pushed her way in between some of the others. "What's happening?" she asked.

"Harry's dying," Sariah told her.

The icy coldness had traveled to his core, and Harry began to shiver, curling up with a moan. Enna reached out and put her hand on his shoulder, seeking to heal him with her power. He felt her cold healing touch and instead of soothing as it normally did, it stung.

Vosenn pushed Enna's hand away. "You can't help. That will only make it worse."

"Oh no!" Enna said in distress.

Madalena was giving orders. "I want a room for him, with a fireplace. Built the fire up as big as you can. Someone needs to go tell Lexian and Amanda Raschadin that their children and nephew have returned."

A minute later they gathered around him, lifting him up and carrying him as he shivered. He was put in another room, a warm room in which a magical smokeless fire was burning. They covered him with lots of blankets, but the shivering wouldn't stop.

"I don't believe it," Sariah said.

"Believe it," Vosenn said grimly. She shook her head. "I can't see him like this." She covered her face with her hands to hide her tears and left the room with Draco.

Enna was crying too, and somebody finally picked her up and carried her off to her rooms to rest. They found rooms for the others to stay, leaving only Madalena, Sariah, Jon, Gray, Ren, Hermione and Ron.

"I worry about Enna, too." Sariah said. "If she gives up hope... her anger kept her alive before, but if she gets depressed, she could just die."

"I wonder if that would start any chains of suicide." Jon wondered.

"There is no way the Queen would be affected by it," Gray said dryly. "That woman has more will to live than most of the Pit combined."

Ron shook his head. "So strange, how it works like that," he said. "But you can still die regularly, I guess." He looked to Harry.

"I guess we're never going to find out where the Cursed go when they get the Sun-sickness," Ren commented. "Harry will take the secret with him."

"What is this, the third time Harry has 'died'?" Hermione asked, "It doesn't get any easier, does it?"

"This is different," Gray said. "He flew away, and then we heard he was dead, but now we're actually going to have to watch him die, soon. And there's nothing that can be done to help him, or stop it."

"Shouldn't we try?" Ron prompted.

"Believe me," Madalena told them. "This isn't the first time this has happened, and people have tried everything. Nothing can re-light the fire. It's put there by the Gods and when it's gone, it's gone."

Just then Lexian and Amanda came in.

"Ren, Gray!" Amanda said happily, rushing over to them to give them welcoming hugs.

"Hello Madalena," Lexian greeted his older sister. "What news?"

"Harry," Madalena said. She gestured behind her. "He's going to die. You need to say good-bye to him."

"Harry?" Amanda crept over to the bed peering down at him. "He's James' and Lily's only child... all that's left of them would be gone forever." She said it curiously; as if she didn't quite believe it, but when she saw his pale face it sunk in. Turning around, she went to Lexian distraught. Lexian folded his wings around them, wrapping them around Amanda.

"Shh," he said. "It's alright." Lexian took a look at Harry himself, and winced. "It's true, then."

Madalena nodded.

"Harry?" Amanda called his name, but he didn't respond or react. His eyes were nearly closed; he didn't seem to be looking at anything.

Harry felt so very cold, and so weak that the weight of the blankets felt like a ton of bricks, holding him in place. He'd never felt so powerless before, not even as a prisoner in the Keep.

I don't want to die, Harry thought. How can I just die, like that? Aren't I a demi-god? Harry thought back over everything his mother had told him about Gods. I can, he decided, because my body is just a normal mortal body. Any... godliness I have is contained on the inside, like a shell. And if my mortal body dies, I can't stay here. I have to go to Sky's End, like my mother did, not strong enough to be seen and touched without a body. I would have to watch over them from above... I don't even know how to help them from there, who knows how long it would take for me to learn. Certainly not in time.

He wanted to tell them that he wouldn't be gone completely, that he would be watching over them, but he didn't have any breath left.

I don't want my life to be over! I want to spend more time with these people, my family and friends; I still have to protect them. I'm not ready to die.

Nobody was listening to what he wanted. Everything was slipping away.

It was so cold.

## Chapter Thirty-Six: Without a Farewell

To everyone's shock, Harry was still alive two days later. If what he was could be called living—he was clearly on his way out, and expected to die very soon. In the morning, Enna snuck away from her room and to where they had tucked Harry away. He was barely breathing, and no matter how warm they made the room, he wouldn't stop shivering. Any visitors broke into a sweat within minutes of being in his room, it was so hot. Harry himself felt a rather normal temperature to the touch, which of course for him was dangerously low.

Enna sat on the edge of the bed, and draped herself over him, close to crying again. This was the first time she'd caught him alone, and even though she didn't know whether or not he could hear her, she had her own goodbyes to say.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you, Harry," she whispered. "You're right. I should have listened to what you had to say... I was just so angry at the time—" she backpedaled, "Well forget about that now. I wish you weren't dying, maybe we could have sorted it all out... maybe." She sighed. "I love you still, I always will."

He didn't react to her words; she couldn't tell if he was even breathing anymore.

The door opened behind her slowly, she turned to see some of the others come to see him. It was Ren, the Hand, Ron and Hermione.

"Um, is he still alive?" Gray asked.

Enna got to her feet, and laid a hand on his forehead, not reaching to heal, but sensing. Under her hand, his life force was flickering. "It's happening," she told them. "He's finally dying."

"He was strong, wasn't he?" Ren asked. "He held on a lot longer than any of the others ever did."

Vosenn nodded. She hadn't been around much, she felt directly responsible for Harry's condition. Everyone else had forgiven her by now. She had been only following her training, and the circumstances.

If it was anybody's fault it was the teachers at the Academy, or more likely Aeyris. They all felt bitterly about the Queen's involvement. If she had kept her cool, it would never have happened.

"Goodbye, Harry," Enna whispered, stepping back and taking Sariah's hand. They stood over him solemnly, helpless and heartbroken.

They blinked. It was becoming hard to see Harry; there was some kind of haze between them.

In front of the bed, a swirl of smoke was rising. It rose higher, into the height and shape of a person. It condensed. In front of them stood a young woman, where there had been nothing a moment before.

The young woman's looks left them frozen. She was less eerily beautiful than she was beautifully eerie. Each lock of hair seemed to be made of a different color, a range of golds and reds. Her skin was a flawless, with more than enough of it showing to tell. Her top was two pieces of metal fashioned like armor that barely covered her breasts, held on by thin chains, and her skirt was made of chain mail with slits up to her waist on both sides.

She ignored them, turning her back to them. She took a corner of the blanket and deftly flipped it back, then swung a leg over Harry, straddling him. She put a hand on each of his shoulders and they watched in amazement as his shivering suddenly ceased.

The woman leaned forward and touched her lips to Harry's in a kiss. There was a spark of light where their lips met. Wrapping one hand behind his head and one around his shoulder, she pulled Harry up toward herself and kissed him deeply, passionately. As she let go, Harry suddenly gasped, taking in a deep breath of air, eyes fluttering open.

The deadly gorgeous woman in armor looked to those watching with eyes blood red, smiled a wicked, mischievous smile, and winked. Then she disappeared into a curl of smoke and was gone.

Harry was sitting up, smoothing hair back from his face and taking deep breaths.

Enna stepped forward and lightly touched him. "He's not dying anymore!" she exclaimed.

"The flame is relit," Harry confirmed tiredly, the first words he'd spoken since it had been put out.

"How?" Vosenn said incredulously.

"Harry, who was that!" Jon asked, shaking his head.

"Who was she?" Ren repeated.

Harry looked at them seriously. "The only ones capable of relighting Wrath's flame would be Wrath himself... or maybe his daughter." They looked at him questioningly. "That was Lush, daughter of Wrath and the Sun Goddess... the Goddess of Desire."

They stared at where she had been standing.

"A Goddess!" Sariah breathed in awe.

"Harry..." Ron began to say, and trailed off.

"Harry is that who... the one that..." Gray didn't know how to finish the question either.

Harry nodded, and they gasped.

"The Goddess of Desire!" Vosenn demanded. "Really, Harry?"

Enna was looking withdrawn. "No wonder," she murmured. "She was stunning..."

"I didn't have much of a choice about it," Harry told them. "You might have been able to tell... she doesn't take no for an answer. I don't remember most of it, honestly."

"You had sex with the Goddess of Desire," Gray repeated, also incredulous.

"And she basically brought you back from the dead," Hermione said.  
"You would have died if she hadn't shown up right then."

"Harry," Vosenn asked again. "Where were you after you caught the sun-sickness?"

They fell silent, anxiously waiting to hear.

"Sun-sickness is actually a call from the Gods," Harry explained.  
"They call the most powerful Cursed to live among them."

"Meaning you," Vosenn said, sounding proud.

"Yes," Harry said, "The call is very strong, if we can't escape and fly there, we kill ourselves which will get us there as well, once we're called. So... the time I was gone I was at Sky's End, the home of the Gods."

"Where you meant her," Jon stated. He was begging to sound envious.

Harry was getting drowsy, clearly he wasn't fully recovered. He needed a little more time. "I need to sleep," he told them. He kicked the blankets off the bed. "You can put out the fire," he told them, eyes closing, falling into restorative sleep. Gray extinguished the magical fire with his casting stone.

"To live in the home of the Gods..." Hermione whispered in awe as they left.

Everyone immediately huddled about to discuss what they had seen, and marvel, but not Enna. She had the sudden need to be alone, and ran back to her room as fast as she had run from it that morning and to Harry's side.

She threw herself on her bed, taking huge breaths and trying not to cry.

She was so beautiful, Enna thought. On one hand, she had just had to face her rival and didn't think she could compare, but on the other hand she had just found out that Harry hadn't wanted to be with this... Lush and couldn't even remember most of it.

Enna was interrupted in her thoughts with the realization that someone was in her room, just a couple feet away, and drew back in surprise.

It was the Goddess, Lush, just as they had seen her before. She was casually seated high on a stone shelf, long legs crossed. "Hello," she said, with a slight smile on her face. "So you're the one he loves."

Enna gaped at her. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I only want to talk," Lush said in her silky voice.

"What is there to say?" Enna asked resignedly.

"Lots..." Lush said, throwing her hands up. She leapt gracefully down and landed on her feet. Enna stood up too, and they faced each other. "I've made a big mistake," Lush revealed.

Enna waited expectantly, curious.

"I tried to tear you and Harry apart..." Lush explained. "I wanted him for myself; you better than anyone can understand why. But he loves you, and he will probably never forgive me for what I've done. Saving his life was the best apology I could come up with."

Enna was struck with a thought. "You saved him... now he can be with me."

Lush nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

Lush just smiled mysteriously in response. "I came to apologize and explain. I broke your bond on purpose. Harry had no choice. In all honesty, it wouldn't have worked unless he was actually attracted to

me, unless part of him wanted it. You saw how I revived Wrath's flame just now. I did the same thing then, making it flare up so that he was reduced to a primal state... in which he had no objections. He was quite enthusiastic, actually." Lush caught a glimpse of the look on Enna's face and stopped.

"You're terrible at apologizing," Enna told her.

"I've never had to do it before," Lush explained.

"Ever?" Enna asked, realizing the Goddess was serious.

"Ever," Lush repeated. "There is only one way for the bond I broke to be repaired... not even the Goddess of Love, who made it in the first place, could fix it for you now," Lush said softly. "You would have to forgive him... completely and entirely." She looked at Enna speculatively. "If you can do that, then you're a more remarkable mortal than I thought. If you can do that, you might even be worthy of him..."

Without a farewell Lush then disappeared and Enna stood alone. At first Harry slept peacefully, but after a time he began to dream. His near death experience must have brought him closer to his demi-god side, because it was similar to his dream at Sky's End. The anxious voices pleaded to him, only this time he could understand them. He listened to one after another, and instead of becoming anxious like them he became angry. They were miserable and very lonely, and they only wanted help.

I'll help you... Harry promised silently, wondering if they could hear him. You are not alone.

He didn't know how long he had slept, but when he went into the next room he saw several of his friends still there, no doubt waiting for him to wake up so that they could ask more questions. It was Vosenn, Jon, and Gray.

"Are you well enough to be up?" Vosenn asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," Harry said, "Back to perfect health."

Gray grinned. "You had us worried, Harry. You have no idea how relieved we are that you survived."

"I'm so sorry Harry—" Vosenn began to say.

"Don't," Harry said, cutting her off. "It clarified something very important for me. After all, here I am, no harm done, right?"

"I suppose not..." Vosenn said, confused.

"Has Madalena explained the new reinforcements to you?" Harry asked Gray, who nodded. "Is everyone safe here?"

"As safe as they're going to be anywhere," Gray said. "As far as we know, nobody could get in, or even know we're here."

"I need to leave," Harry said. "Tell Enna I love her and that I'll come back."

"Wait," Jon said. "Where are you going?"

He said it too late, because Harry had disappeared.

"He ported out," Gray said with surprise.

"He could have gone anywhere," Vosenn realized.

Harry materialized on a small platform at the end of the sky, standing in front of an ancient door. It was night.

Over time this place had been becoming surreal to him... had he actually been here? The normalness of Origin's surface and his friends had been eclipsing its reality. How could they both exist?

Yet here he was again, and the door was opening as if it wanted him to step through. Through it he stepped, crossing the weathered stone floor and the dark glass Eye, heading for Dark Eye's dark blue door. As he reached it he hesitated, and on a whim he turned and followed the circle until reaching the door with the sun on it. It didn't open on its own like the other doors, so he pushed.

The room inside wasn't brightly gleaming as it had last time he was here. The lights were low, the corners were filled with shadows, and the arrogant Sun Goddess was nowhere to be seen. It is nighttime, after all, Harry thought.

However there was someone on the throne. Lush was slumped there, not sitting straight and proud as her mother had but sideways, with her legs over one armrest and her elbows resting on the other. She didn't look up when Harry entered.

Harry stood there silently... he hadn't intended on coming to her, and he hadn't thought he would find her so readily. He had no words planned to say. But he had lots of questions.

"How did you know to come?" Harry asked.

"I was watching you in the Eye."

"But you can't do that unless..." Harry protested.

"Unless I really loved you?" Lush finished calmly. "Yes."

Harry shook his head.

"Yes," Lush repeated, looking at him with soft red eyes. "I've been watching you for a long time. I've been so lonely, Harry, and I was so sure we were meant to be together... we would be magnificent together. I saw your mother looking down on you once, and I fell in love with you. From then on I watched you myself. I saw your relationship with the mortal, and your bond, and I thought it was all wrong. I thought it was a trap, I thought it was wrapping up your mind and your amazing power and tying it to a mortal. You didn't know what you really were, and I thought you would understand once you knew. So the first opportunity that came up I had my mother call you here, and would have explained things to you if your grandmother hadn't noticed and made me bring you to her. She's one of the Great Gods," Lush explained, "And you belonged more to her than to me. I couldn't refuse."

"You took me from my friends," Harry told her.

"They were mortals; I didn't think much of it." Lush shrugged and continued. "So then when you were so fixated on returning to your mortal love, I thought that it was only the bond you had kept you tied to her, that it clouded your thoughts. I decided I had to break it... I thought I was rescuing you."

Harry shook his head. "You raped me."

"Harry it wouldn't have happened if you didn't want it too," Lush reasoned. "I couldn't have made you do anything you didn't want to do."

"But you didn't give me a chance to refuse," he countered.

"That is true." Lush nodded. "I thought that I was freeing you. You were angry, but I figured you would get over it once you understood that I had only been trying to help."

Harry shook his head. "No. You were so arrogant to think you were right. You were so selfish to think you could do whatever you wished."

"Don't you think I see that now?" Lush asked him. "I broke the bond, and you still loved her! You took off at first opportunity. I saw how sad you were when you returned to her, and nothing was the same... how much you wanted her back."

"Fine," Harry said. "So you wanted me to be with you... but then why did you save my life? I wouldn't have gone on as mortals do when they die, I would have come right here to Sky's End and I wouldn't have been able to stay out of your way."

"You still don't understand," Lush repeated. "I DO love you. I love you more than I love myself. If you really want to stay alive, be mortal and stay with that girl, and if I'm the only one around to rescue you, I'm going to do so!"

Harry was taken aback. "Oh."

"And maybe it was my way of apologizing to you. I don't expect you to forgive me any time soon but..." She looked directly into his eyes. "Mortals aren't forever, Harry. But I have forever to wait for you. I'll be here."

Seeing her was giving him a sudden flashback... He had thrown her on the bed, and began to tear off her clothes. She laughed, thrilled, and fought back in the spirit of it, biting and kissing the sides of his neck as he pushed her down... he could feel the touch of her soft skin...

At these final words Harry turned and quickly left, fleeing from the memories, uncomfortable with the thoughts he was facing. Forever is a long time. What will I do if I lose Enna? Does Lush really love me enough to let me go?

In the center room he glanced at his mother's door, wishing he could go there next and knowing how pleased she would be to see him. But he had important things to attend to first.

He stepped through the dark blue door, crossed the entrance room. He winced a moment to see the Storm Leader's door with the feather on it—he couldn't imagine himself ever being comfortable there, after what had happened in that room.

Harry touched Dark Eyes door, and a deep ringing sound resounded in his ears. The door paused, and then opened slowly.

Dark Eyes himself was standing at the window, by the millions of brilliant stars. He turned to watch his grandson enter.

"You're back," Dark Eyes said.

Harry took in a deep breath, intimidated but determined. "Yes. I've been having dreams."

"What kind of dreams?" A smile touched Dark Eye's mouth.

"Dreams of people talking to me, all of them sad," Harry told him. "And today I realized who they are."

Dark Eyes looked at him expectantly.

"They're all portal guides," Harry said.

Dark Eyes nodded. "I think you came here for the same thing that I realized when you were last standing in this room." He gestured for Harry to come nearer, and Harry joined him at the window. "The portal guides have been lonely since the beginning of their very existence," Dark Eyes continued. "They have no hope to ever be free from oppression and misery. When you stood here, glowing, with those black wings of yours, I realized that you must be the God they've been waiting for. They deserve to have one. None of them deserve to be Cursed any longer."

Harry nodded. "The people trained to take care of them are also trained to kill them. It ends now, Grandfather."

"What do you propose to do about it?" Dark Eyes asked, looking at Harry thoughtfully with his ink black eyes.

Harry smiled wryly. "Well, that's why I'm here. I need your help... I have some ideas, but I don't know how they would work."

"Take a seat," Dark Eyes offered, and Harry saw a second chair had appeared by the fire. They went to sit together and plan.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven: What Gods Dream

“So, Harry,” Dark Eyes said, looking at Harry seriously, the inky pools of his eyes drawing him in. “The first step. Your entire plan depends on you being able to it. Do you think you can?”

Harry bit the inside of his lip.

“I honestly don’t think you’re ready,” Dark Eyes said. “You’re barely even a demi-god, and this is one the most advanced skills gods can acquire. It’s too big of a leap... I think you need to wait a couple years. I have a suggestion for you.”

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“Kill yourself,” Dark Eyes said bluntly.

“What?!”

“It would be the utmost level of commitment if you returned to Origin now, said goodbye to your friends and killed yourself.” Dark Eyes raised an eyebrow, looking at Harry skeptically, clearly questioning his level of commitment. “Once free of your mortal body, you would return here and I would train you intensively until you have full control of all your potential powers. Then we move to the first step.”

Harry was shaking his head.

“No?” Dark Eyes asked. “Let me explain to you fully. There is a big difference between a free god and a mortal god. In our natural form, we have powers beyond that of the material. We can create, we can change. Your mortal body may hold you back, restrain you. On the other hand...” He frowned thoughtfully for a moment. “As gods we are beyond the physical world, and therefore cannot be a part of it. Because of this incredible power, fights among the gods need to be avoided at all costs. Every god is restrained by rules, by a code of conduct. If any god ever steps over the line he is pulled back by the others, no one god is strong enough to resist the entire power of any of the others combined. Because of the code, you can’t meddle in the affairs of the other gods... for instance I wouldn’t be able to kill any people of the other gods, or interfere in their lands or planets. And it’s

also frowned upon to directly involve yourself in the lives of your people too much. It's not against the rules, but if the other gods don't like it, they can call a meeting and vote against you. We can only help in small ways. If there is need of it, I advise the current Queen of the Silents in decisions. Of course we all make exceptions, but that's the basics of it."

"But I don't intend on involving myself in the lives of my people just a small bit. I intend on involving myself a lot," Harry pointed out.

Dark Eyes sighed, and rested his forehead on his hand for a moment. "That is the tricky part. Especially since the portals involve all the races and all of the planets, and your people are the only ones capable of providing them. Meaning even though they are your people, your decisions affect everyone else."

"So my hands are tied," Harry said logically.

Dark Eyes shook his head. "Not exactly... being in a mortal body exempts you from the code. You don't have access to your complete power, so you're allowed to become part of the story, as long as you don't tell anyone you're a god. If you do, then it's cheating, because you can then order them all about. Many of the gods have reincarnated themselves now and then over time, and lived among their people. It's an interesting experience. You age with your body, die with it and then return to Sky's End. You can decide to remember who you are, or you can decide to forget."

"So as a mortal, I can interfere all I want because I'm outside the rules," Harry clarified. "Then I can't kill myself, I need a body."

"This is going in circles," Dark Eyes said dryly. "We're back to the fact that you're not powerful enough as a mortal."

"There's absolutely no chance?" Harry asked. "Can't I even try?"

Dark Eyes looked speculatively at Harry. "Well you've got one huge factor in your favor," he said decisively. "Come along Harry."

He got up and Harry followed, leaving Dark Eye's place, back through the dark blue door into the large chamber of the doors. Dark Eyes led Harry to a thick, reinforced door of stone. It had a huge lock on it, and was chained securely closed. Dark Eyes picked up the lock, running his fingers over it. It clicked open. The door started to shake, rattling despite its weight, as if some terrible beast waited impatiently on the other side. With a push the door swung open, and the air was sucked out of the room.

On the other side of the door was the Void.

Casually Dark Eyes walked through the door and into the Void. The wind seemed to part where he stood, not a hair on his head was out of place. Harry frowned, perplexed, and followed. Whatever Dark Eyes was standing on didn't exist for Harry, and the wind hit him as never before, trying to rip him to pieces. The door closed behind him and disappeared. He flapped his wings, trying to stay close to his grandfather. The wind fought back, insistently pushing him away, but Harry was winning.

Dark Eyes watched him for a couple minutes. Harry had never been in the Void this long, but fortunately he had the stamina.

"Exactly," Dark Eyes said. His voice was clearly audible.

"What?" Harry asked, getting tired of being confused.

"You just made my point," Dark Eyes explained. "Even though you are mortal, you can withstand the Void. If other mortal gods tried to enter the Void their bodies would disintegrate like any regular mortal." He looked around the Void. "You can see why we created Origin and the planets."

"Yes."

"It has its uses," Dark Eyes added. "It's the ideal condition to create."

"What now?" Harry asked.

"Fall asleep," Dark Eyes ordered.

"Here?" Harry said. "That's impossible." The wind was pounding him, he was covered in biting ice and if he stopped pumping his wings he would plummet into nothingness.

"It's the only way. If you can't do it, you're not ready. You're going to have to wait; your people are going to have to wait."

Harry shook his head. "They can't wait."

"So try," Dark Eyes told him. "But if you can't do it, you'll have to go to Origin, kill yourself, train, and then return here. Then you can be reincarnated and wait until you're grown enough to complete what you started."

Harry could tell by the tone of his voice that his grandfather didn't have much confidence in him at this point in time. He's probably right. He does know what he's talking about, after all. But I have to at least try. I don't want to have to wait, and I don't want to have to kill myself. If I kill myself I lose my body, and I can't return to it. I would never be able to return to my friends or my life, and I still have things to do. He looked to the task before him. This is impossible.

"If I stop flying, I'll fall," Harry stated. He could feel it all around him... infinity. Never ending Void. Never ending chaos.

"Then fall," Dark Eyes said. "Surrender."

If there had been air, Harry would have taken a deep breath. Clenching his fists, steeling himself, he folded his wings tight against his body. He was torn away immediately, spinning, falling. Dark Eyes dwindled away and disappeared in the distance. Harry squeezed his eyes shut. Behind his eyelids... Etilon plummeting... lack of control... memories of losing himself. His instincts screamed at him to fight, to survive, to save himself. Harry tried to relax, limbs flopping about. He peeked. He didn't know where he was. There were no planets to be seen no sign of the way back. No escape.

Harry kept falling. Sleep, he told himself. Yeah right. Try sleeping in an industrial freezer while somebody punches you in the stomach...

that would be hard. And the Void is much, much worse. Harry realized his grandfather was probably watching him from somewhere (probably his nice comfortable warm armchair next to the fire) and waiting, ready to bring him back and tell him he had failed. No, Harry thought stubbornly. I won't!

He filled his thoughts with images of the people who had whispered to him in his sleep, ran their words through his mind. I promised them.

The wind lessened slightly. He peeked again, and then blinked his eyes open. He was beginning to glow again. Very faintly, but the blue-violet aura on his skin was shielding him. As he watched, it faded slightly and the wind increased.

Harry repeated the process, focusing on the need of the portal guides, and then peeked quickly—he was glowing brighter now, the wind stilling. Sleep now, he reminded himself.

Eyes closed, cradled in the Void, Harry surrendered.  
Time passed.

Harry dreamed.

He was back in a dream he was very familiar with—flying, soaring over a shifting landscape. He enjoyed effortless flight for a few moments before looking closer at the ground below him. It was plain rock.

'Hmm,' he thought. 'What was I doing again?'

The ground shifted now, becoming mountains similar to the mountain range of the Pit. They built up higher and higher into the sky, into the cold air. Stars passed above, guiding the moon through the sky, then the sky lightened dramatically and the sun shone beautifully on the mountains, now covered with a layer of ice and snow. Another moon passed as he flew. Another sun.

He lost track of his body; he was no longer flying. He now explored the landscape directly, passing through caves and valleys and over the tips of the mountain ranges.

The sky above was a pendulum: light, then dark, then light, dark, light, dark, light...

Harry was sleeping peacefully on a solid, pleasantly cool surface. He blinked his eyes open and sat up. Around him were mountain ranges of incredible height, snow... am I awake? This is the place of my dreams.

He got to his feet and looked around. Harry felt intimately familiar with everything he laid his eyes on. He had been here before.

A sudden presence behind him. Harry turned around. Dark Eyes.

Dark Eyes had an indecipherable expression on his face. His head was slightly tilted, his brows down as if concerned, but the side of his mouth twitched upward. He looked intrigued, surprised, amused and proud, all at once.

"Not bad, Harry. Not bad at all. I can help you tweak it a bit over time if necessary." Dark Eyes looked around the landscape. "Welcome to your own planet. What will you call her?"

Realization rushed back to Harry— the planet was familiar to him because he had created it. He had set out to do the impossible and achieved it. "I don't know," he replied.

"That's alright. You've been busy." Dark Eyes was nodding his head. "Very, very impressive, Harry."

"How long have I been... busy?" Harry asked.

"Relative to what?" Dark Eyes asked. "You know how Sky's End is. It is separate and everywhere, all at once. On Origin, several months have passed."

Harry tried to work this into his reality. The puzzle pieces just didn't fit. I made a planet. Several months have gone by. Right.

Harry knocked politely on the Lavender door in the chamber of doors. It kept trying to open for him, but he didn't want to just barge in. It was high time he pay a visit to his mother, but she wasn't answering.

Finally he went in. The front room was empty, but one of the doors was open and he peered through it.

His mother slept inside, lounged on a high bed of sorts. She was bearing a beautiful dress, as if she were just taking a short nap. She opened her eyes then, seeing him. Still half asleep, she smiled widely. "Harry."

She got to her feet, running her fingers through her loopy curls to arrange them, even though they were perfect already. "Sit down," she said, ushering him back to the chairs in the main room. "Do tell what you've been up to. I wasn't able to find you for a while there."

"I was in the Void," Harry told her. "I made a planet."

Lily had been getting a glass of sweet juice, and nearly dropped it, sloshing liquid over the edges. She peered at him curiously, trying to gauge if he was serious. "You... wait, what?"

"A planet," Harry repeated, trying to get used to the syllables. "Mine."

She discarded the glass and sat across from him. "Harry, that is... wow. I've never made one, myself. Too big of a responsibility. There are too many broken hearted people to take care of as it is."

"Sorry I didn't tell you before," Harry said. "I wanted to just do it. I didn't know if I could." He remembered Dark Eye's suggestion that he end his life, and wondered what his mother would think of that. She had been so adamant that he have a normal mortal life, she had sacrificed her own closeness to her only child for the sake of that one thing alone. He'd almost thrown it away. Harry doubted Lily would have forgiven her father for that one.

Lily was looking for words to use. "Well that's very unusual," she finally settled on tamely.

"Extraordinary?" Harry prompted teasingly.

"Very," she confirmed. "What, pray tell, do you intend on doing with this planet?"

"I'm going to steal the portal guides and put them there," Harry said in a logical tone.

"Well, Harry," Lily said delicately. "That would be against the code, I know it's probably never been explained to you, but—"

"Oh, I know," Harry interrupted. "You're forgetting something, though. Why did you leave me on Earth and return to Sky's End?"

"So you could be mortal," Lily finished, then frowned.

"Exactly," Harry said, seeing that she had understood. "Nobody can complain, because I'm going to achieve it as a mortal."

"That's quite a weighty task," Lily told him. "It's extremely difficult to have an impact on the world as a mortal. That's why it's allowed. It's too much work, so nobody tries. To the gods it's too much of a hassle to be born, take the time to grow up and be deprived of their powers all the while."

Harry shrugged. "Well I'm going to try. I began to understand some of the voices, and they were portal guides. Dark Eyes thinks I'm meant to be their god."

Lily's eyes narrowed. "Dark Eyes, hmm?" she said dangerously. "Father never understood my decision. He's probably trying to push you too quickly."

"Don't worry, Mother," Harry said soothingly.

Lily sighed. "Harry, there's something you didn't mention."

"Yeah? What?"

"I've been hearing from Enna a hell of a lot," Lily told him. "Someone must have told her that the Goddess of Love was responsible for bonds like the one you two had, so she's been talking to me."

Like the one you two had, Harry repeated silently. "Oh. That."

Lily waited. "Well? What happened?"

Frustrated and embarrassed, Harry gritted his teeth. This is going to be awkward. "The bond broke," he said. "But I didn't do it."

"I never thought you did," Lily said.

Harry paused, feeling immediately better. She believes in me. Nobody else did, but she believes in me.

"It has to do with Lush," Harry said. "Remember her?" Lily nodded. "Do you remember how she stared at me really intensely?"

Lily's eyes were narrowing again. "Yes..."

"Lush is... fixated on me," Harry explained. "She says she loves me, and thinks that I don't belong with a mortal... so she tried to 'fix' it. I don't really remember what happened. I get flashbacks now and then. Since Lush is Wrath's daughter, she has a degree of control over Wrath's flame. So she just fired it up so that I wasn't in the right mind to protest."

Lily threw her hands up. "That's... rape, Harry!"

"Yes, I know," he said, then added a very sarcastic, "She apologized, later."

"The nerve!" Lily snorted in a manner quite unlike her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was embarrassed," Harry admitted. "Can you fix it?"

"No," Lily said. "It's usually a one shot deal. The bond isn't meant to be fixed. It only works with two people who are highly compatible. Enna may love you and know it's not your fault, but it's still going to stick in her mind and it's still going to be between you always. Simply the fact that the bond was broken once means you two will never be that compatible, ever again."

Harry absorbed this stoically. "The bond was helping us so much," he told her. "I was getting calmer and more in control because of her, and she was so much less scared. Now that the bond is gone, we're struggling."

Lily raised her eyebrows. "That's fascinating... that never occurred to me before." She hesitated before continuing. "I don't want to get your hopes up Harry... it's unlikely, but if Enna can work through her feelings, the bond could be restored. She would have to let go entirely. Let go of the sadness of being separated from you, and all the anger she has for Lush. I don't expect she can do that. It's not in her nature."

"Creating a world on my own was impossible too," Harry pointed out. "But I did it. So you never know what can happen."

"Speaking of your planet," Lily asked. "What's it called?"

Harry shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea. I don't want to give it some awful name and get stuck with it."

"If you don't name it, everybody else will call it something," Lily told him. "Believe me, when word gets out people are going to be talking about it. And no doubt they'll call it something atrocious."

"I know."

"Well, what does it look like?" she prompted.

"High mountain ranges with caves and plateaus, lots of ice and snow... deep valleys with not much in them. It's barren now; I have to stick a couple plants and animals in there. I ran out of steam."

Lily laughed. "Yes. Alright..." she pondered over the name. "Lots of ice... something with frozen in it maybe... you know a lot of the planets aren't even named, they were sort of thrown out there. Origin was easy to name once the other planets were created. Earth took some brainstorming if I remember correctly. I was very young, then."

Harry's mind boggled for a second. My mother was around when the Earth was created!

"Something freezy sounding, maybe, but not exactly. Fraizha?" she suggested, pronounced 'fray-zah'.

Harry shrugged. "Sounds alright to me."

"Fraizha, then," Lily said, proud. "Aw... little god-ling... I got to name your first planet."

Harry rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "I don't think I need any more planets. One is enough."

"Just kidding," she said. "Do you need to rest?"

"I just slept for the last couple months," Harry told her. "I'm... refreshed."

"What other tricks do you have up your sleeve?"

Harry grinned. "Plans. Big plans."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lily asked.

"Maybe."

## Chapter Thirty-Eight: Revolution

Harry trekked through a valley on Fraizha, exhausted. The empty valleys were now filled with trees, many of them fruit trees as Harry rather liked fruit, tall grasses and climbing vines. Mountain goats perched on high ledges, birds fluttered about in the trees.

"Must... sit... down..." Harry told his grandfather, collapsing on a handy rock.

Dark Eyes paused, gazing down at him without much sympathy. Harry had soon learned that Dark Eyes believed in hard work and perfection. "You want to do a good job of it, don't you?" he asked Harry.

Harry nodded. "Of course. I'm not objecting to making plant and animal life. I'm having issues with the pace."

Dark Eyes shrugged. "Creating takes more energy than anything else you'll ever do."

"It wasn't so hard when I made the planet as when I did all these little things," Harry complained.

"You were in the Void then. The Void is the best conditions for creating, I told you that Harry. Now you have to move in closer for the details, and that takes some of your own energy."

Harry sighed and got to his feet.

"People don't understand what's involved in making a planet... it's so easy to make mistakes. You have no idea how many planets are out there floating about empty because they were made incorrectly. You have to account for everything. The food chain must be complete; you need good water sources and natural resources for your people. Fortunately I was able to help you with all of that. You also must make the planet as complete as possible now, before your people come here. Since you insist on living among them, you're going to have to hide who you are. Mortal gods aren't allowed to reveal the truth about themselves," Dark Eyes warned him. "None of your people can ever see you use power like this."

"Understood," Harry said.

Luckily they were almost done. When Fraizha was complete enough to satisfy Dark Eyes, he disappeared back to Sky's End, while Harry took the roundabout route. He entered the Void, looking back briefly. It was smaller than Earth, and evenly textured. The skies were clear, perfect for flying.

Harry ported onto the platform and walked through the front door. He stopped on the clouded window on the floor that was the Eye, and then took a couple steps back, looking down at it. Time to try again?

He kneeled and touched it, holding on to the image of his friends, trying to put emotion into it. Faint images appeared, and far off voices. Finally he got a clear picture of Enna, hair plaited up, sitting with her silly little bird. She looked a little sad, a little lost.

Just then somebody walked up behind him and grabbed his shoulder. He lost the image, and got to his feet, turning around.

It was Lush. Harry sighed, and was about to ask her what was so important that she felt the need to bother him right then, when he got a better look at her and stopped, interested. This wasn't the cool, poised Lush he knew. Her usual revealing outfits were replaced with a short simple dress, which looked like something she had slept in. Her eyes were just a little too wide, with just a touch of panic.

She just stared at him. Not piercingly, not lustfully, but urgently.

"Lush?" he asked finally.

"Harry! There's something I have to tell you!" She blurted out.

"Yes?"

She opened her mouth, then stopped and closed it. A peculiar expression crossed her face. "It's..."

"What?"

"... Nothing," she said finally. "Forget it."

She turned away quickly but Harry caught her arm, pulling her back. She looked down at his hand, then her gaze slowly traced up his arm and shoulder before returning to his face. She looked surprised that they were connected, surprised he had touched her.

"What is it?" Harry asked firmly. "Something is clearly wrong."

Lush shook her head. "You don't care anyway. You hate me."

Harry didn't say anything. What was there to say? Telling her he hated her would be cruel... but... he didn't, anymore, really. He wanted nothing to do with her, true, but he honestly wished that she could find happiness somewhere. But if he told her he didn't hate her, she might take it the wrong way and think he had feelings for her.

Lush took his silence as an affirmation and jerked out of his grip, turning away quickly. He wasn't sure but he thought there may have been small tears sparkling in her eyes.

She went into her mother's room and closed the door firmly without looking back.

Harry felt vaguely guilty, though he knew he hadn't done anything wrong. I wonder what she was going to tell me, he thought. Whatever it was, she was upset about it. Maybe I should follow her, ask again, tell her I don't hate her. It could have been something important. Harry decided against it. Lush is trouble. I should just stay clear.

Every square inch of stone wall was familiar, memorized. Every inch had been touched; every small crack, mark, texture and color was intimate to him. These small variations on the flat stone walls made constellations and pictures that had emerged over time and Aadon knew every one of them.

He sat on his bed. To anyone looking into his cell, he would have appeared brain-dead, mentally gone, intellectually extinct. In truth he was deep in meditation. It was easy. Retreated into his own mind,

memories of his life could play for him like movies. He relaxed and drifted.

It was exercises like this, practice that gave him the control over himself that was absolute.

In the old days, Aadon remembered. The portal guides had much more control over themselves. They had more liberties with their lives, options. They had more respect. Things got worse, that's for sure... none of the young Silents in the Keep these days has any idea of what they're capable of. They don't know discipline, training. The Others have kept it from them, keeping them in the dark. Aadon briefly remembered the young Silent who had been in the cell next to him for a couple days. He was alert, unlike the other mental cases they put down here. He was a good kid. I could have taught him some things.

Aadon wondered where the young man was now. They tried to squash the rumors, but the guards all gossip like housewives when it's time to change shifts. I know what happens in the Keep. He escaped, a second time. That Wild One, he's a Silent from another time. He could have lived back in the day, and held his own. Aadon hoped the young man was far away, and would never come back to this godforsaken place.

It's never going to get any better, Aadon knew, realistically. The Others are overwhelmed with paranoia. We are barely even people anymore. We've slipped through the cracks. The portal guides were forgotten, left behind by the Gods and their own race.

Aadon had silently watched and listened for generations, becoming a peculiarity of the Keep. The Educated were somewhat perplexed by the length of his life. He knew the general belief was that he was so brain-dead that he didn't know to lose hope and die like the others. They discussed it in front of his cell, thinking he couldn't hear him. They said that in his state, he might live forever.

It's incomprehensible to them that I willingly stay on this world, Aadon knew. Hell, I barely even know why I'm here anymore... I'm just goddamn stubborn. If I give up and fade away like the rest of my kind

The Others win. Living is the one and only way to fight back. By living, I am the last remaining piece of the old ways, the ancient times. At least part of it goes on, even if it's wasted in this cell.

When they brought food Aadon pulled the plate into his cell and ate it without tasting it. It wasn't real food. Real food had flavor, life in it. Real food was both self caught and cooked, or cooked by someone who cared, and this wasn't real food.

They collected the plates, in monotonous routine. Just like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that.

People left him alone in his cell. They were particularly afraid of him.

Aadon settled back down and wanted to go back into his meditation, but he was quickly interrupted, distracted by a strange feeling that came over him.

A slight pressure on his temples, a tingling. A faint ringing tone resounded in his ears.

Aadon sat felt still, cataloguing this but not reacting yet. He didn't know why he would get this particular feeling right now. He hadn't felt it in a very, very long time. It was the distinctive feeling of a portal opening nearby. In the Pit, and especially in the Keep, portals were unable to open. It was the will of the god Dark Eyes.

But then again, Aadon didn't put much faith in the gods. His people were a forgotten people. We are Cursed, not because of our abilities themselves, but for the power we wield. That kind of power wasn't meant for mortals.

The shadows on the far side of his cell suddenly held a crouched figure, and the sensation of the portal faded.

Aadon's calm surprise and curiosity was overpowered by a block of frustration. Locked for centuries in a box with no way out, and someone waltzes in, as if the oldest and most powerful of the portal guides was a mere beginner.

The crouched figure lifted its head, peering at the open bars at the end of the cell for the presence of any guards. Finding them alone, he stood to face Aadon.

Aadon had only caught glimpses of this particular Cursed before and very few times, but he recognized him right away: The Wild One. His hair matched his name, standing up all over the place, a compact, muscular body, dark wings, and one feature that gave him away immediately. His eyes were green. Green wasn't a color found anywhere in the Pit; everyone's eyes were shades of blue, brown, black, and gold. Green was for the outside, nature and plants, not rock and deep endless holes.

What surprised Aadon more than the color of the eyes was the control in them, the determined calm. They met eyes easily without a spark of madness.

"Is there anyone outside?" The young Silent asked in a quiet voice.

Aadon walked over to the bars and peered out. The guard at the end of the hall was seated, leaning against the wall reading something. They were supposed to patrol, but on this level no one bothered. There wasn't anything to see.

"No," Aadon said succinctly.

The Wild One paused. "You don't seem particularly surprised to see me here," he commented.

Aadon shrugged. He didn't show much emotion. "How did you manage that?" he asked. "There is an impenetrable barrier around this place. If you know where to look, you can see it from the Void." A brief memory of the fierce freedom of the Void surfaced.

The young Silent smiled slightly. "I had help," he said.

"What kind of help?"

"Well..." the young man said hesitantly. "I have an important mission to perform," he said evasively.

Help, Aadon repeated silently. Who can help him pass through a barrier created by a god but the gods? He reserved judgment, as always. Assumptions and judgments were for young fools. "What kind of mission?" he asked.

The Wild One stepped from the shadows, looking at Aadon seriously. "Mass breakout. The time for this atrocity is over. I've learned some things since I was last here. I've been in the Void. I've come to an understanding... the understanding that the 'Cursed' is the biggest misunderstanding ever made. We're not cursed; we're made exactly as we were meant to be. Because we're different, doesn't make it wrong. Power like ours is a give and take. We were given the ability, and now we have to accommodate for it. And the rest of the Silents are never going to be able to understand, so we have to take matters into our own hands."

Aadon nodded while he talked, impressed. He may be young, but he is wise beyond his years. He sees what so many are blind to. He sees beyond what he is told, he knows to look further than the first thing you're told. I may be able to take him seriously. "You're correct on most of that, but mistaken on one small, but crucial detail: We are cursed by the gods that have deserted us."

Strangely enough, the young man's response to this was to smile. "No more," he said.

"The gods never cared before," Aadon said. "Why would that change now?"

"A new god was born," The Wild One divulged. "It happens now and then. Dark Eyes has a grandson. It's become clear that he was meant to be the god of the portal guides, so they're no longer cursed."

This was the biggest news of Aadon's life. As everything else, he considered it very carefully, retreating into his thoughts. A god of our very own... a new hope. This changes everything. He glanced at The Wild One. That must have been his 'help', Aadon decided. Dark Eye's grandson let him through the barrier. I wonder why he didn't say so directly. He quickly ran through several scenarios as to why that

would be the case. He understands what this means for the portal guides. I'm sure if he was able to, he would have mentioned the god's involvement. So for some reason, he's not allowed to. Interesting.

"That is the craziest idea I've ever heard," Aadon told him. "And I've lived a long time. It's a nice thought, but I have been debating over ideas for centuries, and never came across a solution. Where would we go? Remember the portal guides of my time all killed one another off."

"Leave it to our god," the young man suggested.

Aadon reflected on this. This god must be awfully young. Does he know what he's getting himself into?

"You will help me, then?" The Wild One asked.

Aadon nodded. "I've never had anything to place hope on before. It would be a shame to turn something like that down."

The young man grinned, sitting next to Aadon. "We will need to move quickly, and most importantly, none of the other Silents can get hurt. If they realize what we're up to, they will try to stop us and it is crucial that we leave smoothly and in peace. What we don't need is a war on our hands. Also important, no one can be left behind. If a single portal guide is left, they will be able to come after us. Imagine if there only had a small number of portal guides left, they would be mistreated and used. No doubt the Queen would put many guards on them, and would be harder to get to them unless we make a clean break now. You know the Keep better than anyone. What do you think?"

"I have overheard things," Aadon said. "The Queen feels threatened; the Pit is defended like never before. The mages have put up magical barriers everywhere and reinforced old spells. Every single portal guide was pulled back from missions they were on and secured in the Keep. Apparently there was a portal guide not in the Keep some time back, on the mage levels somewhere, and he was kidnapped right out of the Pit."

Aadon noticed a fleeting expression cross his friend's face, as if an old aching worry had resurfaced.

"That works in our favor, because all the portal guides are here, nearby. However, because there's such a high level of alert, all of the students at the Academy were graduated early to train together for real fighting. On the levels above the Keep, an enormous force of Silents is gathered like a bird huddled over a nest. All of them are trained in ways to stop and fight us. If they are alerted, they will storm down here and expertly take out anyone standing up to them."

"Aadon sneered slightly. Bitterness, that was an emotion he was familiar with. "Of all the things they can devote their lives to they choose that."

"You learned all of this while in your cell?" The Wild One asked, surprised.

Aadon smiled. Gossip like housewives, they do.

"What about the guards?" his new friend continued.

Over the years Aadon had obtained a highly developed sense of time. He knew exactly what hour of the day it was, and he had the schedule of the Keep memorized as well as the constellations on the walls.

"In precisely two and a half hours," Aadon stated, "There is a change of guard all over the Keep. It's the beginning of the late shift. We then have six hours until the new crowd moves in."

The Wild One nodded. "We'll start with this level, and move upward. We take out the guards without hurting them, and take their keys."

"Where do we go?" Aadon asked. "Is the barrier around the Pit down? How do we keep them from killing each other when we let them out?"

The Wild One shook his head. "No the barrier is still up. I can pierce a small hole for a portal though. We don't have the time for me to make lots of them, or port everyone out of their cells. At each floor I'll open

a portal in the middle of the hallway, and we will unlock the doors one by one as they disappear into it.”

Aadon struggled with this for a moment. He was used to depending on no one but himself, and he couldn’t analyze the plan as he usually did because the last step was taken out of his hands. He didn’t know what was on the other side of the portal, or what would happen once they got there. He recalled that the Pit was on alert, that the enemy had stolen one of the portal guides.

Wouldn’t it be poetic if the enemy could just port underneath the Silents and steal all the eggs right out of the nest without them knowing it? The Wild One might have been compromised by the enemy after escaping, and is leading us deeper into trouble. He decided to set his mistrust aside. It was better to go somewhere than nowhere at all. It was better to do something then sit and wait for history to pass you by. That theory doesn’t explain the way he ported through the barrier. The gods don’t have any reason to make our lives any worse. We’re neatly packaged away as it is. I’d rather believe that we are no longer forsaken.

“Agreed,” Aadon said. “We will have to move very swiftly. As soon as the guard changes we act immediately.”

For the next two hours The Wild One crouched behind Aadon’s bed, out of sight from the hallway, wings tucked tightly around him. It couldn’t have been comfortable, but there were no complaints.

Aadon carefully tracked the minutes. Right on time, the new guard arrived, walking by and the old guard passed as he left.

You got lucky, Aadon silently told the old guard. Things are going to get rough down here. Go home, sleep, and when you awake your whole world will have changed.

Aadon waited a good three minutes, until he was sure the other guard would be long gone and out of earshot. “Now,” he said.

The other portal guide unfolded himself from the dark corner, shaking his wings out and stretching. He walked to the bars and peeked

through them. The guard was at the end of the hall, barely visible. A few deep growls, increasing in volume, caught the guard's attention. A loud snarl and the guard was interested enough to investigate.

The Wild One drew back, lowering his head to hide his face, becoming very still. The guard stopped in front of the cell, gazing down at the Cursed quietly crouched there, looking kind of bored. Suddenly the guard noticed something strange: Aadon was standing by the bed. There were two portal guides in the cell.

The guard looked back and forth between them. If Aadon was by the bed, then who... the guard made the mistake of stepping too close to the bars. In a lightning quick movement the Wild One thrust his arm between the bars and grabbed the front of the guard's uniform firmly. The guard yelped, trying to twist away, but the grip was unshakable.

Aadon blinked. The Wild One had ported backward a few feet, taking the guard with him into the cell. Aadon watched the guards face. His expression went from indignant to defeated within seconds. He was in a cell with not one but two Cursed that he had been taught to fear, and one of them had just done the impossible.

Gently the Wild One guided the guard to the bed, sitting him down. He removed the keys from the guard's belt and turned away. Aadon followed him to the door, which they unlocked. Stepping out of the cell they closed the door behind them. The lock clicked.

The guard stared at them, stunned. "That's it?" he said. "You're going to leave me in here and take off?"

"The new guard will come by in six hours," Aadon said. "You can yell all you like until then, but believe me, nobody can here you down here."

The guard's jaw dropped. "You talk!"

Aadon smiled smugly. He stretched a moment, letting freedom rush through his veins and the years of solitude and captivity slough off like an old skin. He quickly moved on— they had no time for that.

"I'll be back," the Wild One said, handing Aadon the key and disappearing.

The lowest level of the keep was deep enough that nobody above would hear so Aadon set about to get everyone's attention.

"Hey!" he said loudly, his voice echoing up and down the hall. "Wake up!" Louder, he yelled, "Everyone listen up!" A few faces appeared, looking out at him. He didn't wait for them all, they could hear him. "This is an escape. We're opening a portal. Follow directions, and you will be out of this hellhole. Believe me, you don't want to be left behind." He started for the first door, putting the key into the lock. "And you better move quickly," he added. "We have very little time. This means run for the portal. Sprint. Don't look at me, and don't look at anyone else."

"Hey!" The guard protested. "That's a very bad idea, you know." Aadon ignored him. The Wild One reappeared.

Visible to all except the guard, a small flicker of blue in the center of the hall marked a portal. The portal guides stared at it hungrily.

Aadon unlocked the first individual, who did as Aadon had said and ran into the portal. He moved on to the next several doors, waiting until the portal guides were through the portal before letting the next one out. Some sprinted like death was on their heels, while some looked confused and disoriented. Aadon had to pick some of them up and get them moving. They growled sometimes, but Aadon's calm presence prevented fighting.

"This is going too slow," The Wild One said worriedly.

"This floor is going to be the hardest," Aadon said. "They don't go out much. The upper levels are filled with the portal guides that actively work for the Queen, and they're usually more sane."

"You don't think anyone will want to stay and work for the Queen, do you?" The Wild One asked. "I mean, I know they must have families in the Pit."

Aadon laughed. "Freedom is precious. Anyone down here knows that all too well."

"I'm moving on to the next floor," The Wild One said, leaving.

Aadon continued working his way down the hall. He heard a noise behind him and turned. The Wild One had ported back into the cell with another guard. He smiled mischievously, took the keys and disappeared.

"What is going on?" The second guard demanded.

The first one just shook his head morosely. The new guard walked to the bars and looked out, watching their progress. "This is insane!"

Aadon didn't respond.

"You'll never pull it off."

Aadon ignored him.

The Wild One reappeared several more times in the cell over the next twenty minutes, each time with a guard in tow. Soon the cell was getting crowded and The Wild One had rings of keys on his arms like bracelets.

"I think that's all of them," the Wild One said. "Neatly out of the way, and no one hurt."

"Then you're not going to kill us?" one of them asked.

The Wild One shook his head. "Nope. In the morning someone will come down here and discover you together in the cell, safe and unharmed."

The floor was soon empty, other than one crowded cell of forlorn looking guards in neat blue uniforms. The Wild One closed the portal, disrupting it with one hand, and the two escape artists hurried on to the next floor.

The guards solemnly watched them leave.

On the next floor, the abduction of the guard hadn't gone unnoticed, and everyone was at their cell doors looking out curiously. They watched in amazement as the Wild One opened a portal, and listened attentively while Aadon quickly explained.

Aadon still tracked the minutes passing, growing increasingly concerned about the pace. The Wild One went ahead and made a portal on the next floor, explaining things himself and starting the same process.

On each floor, they became more and more quiet, sneaking along the hallways and whispering instructions. By the last floor it was a race against time, calling urgently for everyone to hurry.

One of the guards of the next shift came early, no doubt to chat with the shift before him, and walked into the hall to find most of the cell doors open. Only five or six of them were still occupied. The guard looked stunned for a moment then turned and sprinted. The Wild One moved to go after him, but Aadon grabbed his shoulder.

"No time," he said. "Help me with the rest."

Soon there was a rumbling above them, a thunder of feet, moving quickly.

Iz was the first to come running through the door, just as Aadon let the last three prisoners out simultaneously. They disappeared.

The Wild One met eyes with Iz across the hall. "Go," he whispered to Aadon, who followed the others.

The Wild One was right behind him, closing the portal just as Iz and his men sprinted towards it.

Author's Note: You reviewers are really lovely. I'm so glad I said something, because at the time of my little rant I was about to give up. I was getting really down about this story. But since then, everyone has been reviewing so wonderfully, it keeps me going. Thank you.

No one knows how long I work on these chapters. They come out quickly, but I spend hours and hours on each one. This one took all day. I don't even want to count the hours, it's kind of depressing. It's just that I have all these ideas speeding through my head and when it comes to writing I do it slowly and deliberately, figuring out exactly what needs to be said and how to say it. I want to get it right.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine: The End of an Era

### Queen Aeyris slept peacefully.

As she woke she smiled faintly, deciding what she would do today. Aeyris excelled at being queen. She had all the processes of the Pit sorted carefully in her head, along with lists of things she needed to attend to, sorted by importance. The Ice Lizards hadn't been seen for months. No one knew where they were hiding or if they were coming back, but Pit defenses stayed on alert. Maybe the Ice Lizards realized the kind of Empire they were up against, Aeyris thought, pleased.

She dressed in a simple dark blue gown that was trimmed with loops of silver chain. As she brushed her hair, she frowned. Another matter had just occurred to her, bumping to the top of her list.

Exiting her rooms she passed Natan, who still liked to watch over her as he had when she was little. He nodded at her in greeting and she smiled. Not much remained from her childhood; she had been elevated to the position of Queen at a young age. Only Natan remained. He grew older, but his dedication was never wavered, and she always felt safe.

Her training for becoming Queen had been demanding. Every day, she had studied. She had memorized all the important names and people of the Pit. She had learned all the aspects of the empire, knew all the functions, all the trade, and all the alliances. She had studied the queens that came before her, learning from them.

As a Princess, she'd scarcely had time to spend with her parents, let alone friends or boys. It had been hard work, but in the end she had risen to the challenge, and managed the entire empire on her own. She became the strong Queen she had dreamt of becoming when she was little.

Aeyris reached her destination, opening the door to her daughter's bedroom. She had to check on Enna periodically to make sure she was alright.

Enna was awake, kneeling on her bed with her blanket wrapped around her, talking to a small white bird. Her hair was disheveled and

her nightdress had slipped from one shoulder. She looked up at her mother and smiled with a sweet expression. The bird flew away to perch on shelf.

Aeyris sighed, asking Dark Eyes for patience.

The girl is sweet, I give her that, Aeyris thought. I am very fond of her. But when I was princess, it meant that every ounce of energy went toward the empire and my future as queen. Whereas Enna sleeps her days away, lovesick, talking to birds. How can she become a Queen when she barely looks people in the eyes? How did this happen to me? She asked, not for the first time.

“How are you, Enna?” Aeyris asked, sitting next to her daughter. Her voice didn’t betray her thoughts. “Have you thought about coming out today? You could join me while I work. I would enjoy your company.”

Aeyris always asked, and Enna always responded the same way, with a brief shake of her head.

“Darling keeps me company,” Enna insisted. “And my friends might visit today.”

That bird again! Aeyris thought with frustration.

“Alright,” Aeyris said calmly.

“Mother?” Enna asked. “Harry has been gone for months now. Do you think he’s alright?”

Aeyris shrugged. “Sorry honey. I don’t know where he went.” The Wild One. Aeyris reflected on him briefly. Enna was fragile to begin with, I trusted her to him and he only made things worse. What a strange Cursed... he survived a dose of concentrated Dowse, and ported right out of the Pit. He’s dangerous, that one.

“He said he would come back,” Enna said sadly.

I sure hope not, Aeyris thought.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" Enna called. The door opened a crack, and some of her friends peered in. Seeing the Queen, they stopped.

The Pit was now a veritable fortress. The young Vineadryads, the Centaur, and the Humans from Earth were safe here. They spent most of their time with The Wild One's old Hand and his cousin, the crippled halfling. Their time traveling together through the wilderness had created an almost palpable connection between them, their friendship ran deep and none of them were discouraged by Enna's reclusive nature. They visited her often.

Aeyris sensed that she wasn't getting anywhere with her daughter, and decided to leave Enna to her friends. At that moment a yell echoed into the room from behind those in the doorway.

"Queen Aeyris! Queen Aeyris!" Someone was yelling, and a group of Iz's men were striding toward her urgently. They waited at the door and Iz himself emerged from among them and entered the room. Enna's little friends spilled into the room as the hallway became overcrowded.

There seemed to be much commotion outside, more yelling and running feet. Clearly something big had happened.

"Your Highness," Iz said breathlessly.

"General," Aeyris greeted him. Was there an attack? She wondered while she waited for him to catch his breath. Have the Ice Lizards returned?

Iz composed himself, but there was still a horrified look in his eyes that alarmed the Queen greatly.

"Your Highness, something terrible has happened," Iz said grimly. "The Cursed are gone. Every single of them disappeared from the Keep overnight."

Aeyris stared at him in disbelief. "That's not possible," she insisted, "What of the guards?"

"We found them packed into one of the cells on the lowest level, completely unharmed," Iz said.

Aeyris was shaking her head. "It can't be," she swore fervently, "What did the guards see? Was it the Ice Lizards?"

Iz looked pained. "No. They weren't abducted... they escaped. I would have trouble believing it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes... it was the Wild One."

Enna jumped to her feet. "Harry? You saw Harry?"

A reddish haired Silent from the Wild One's Hand stepped forward too. "Harry was in the Keep? He freed the Cursed?" she questioned persistently.

Iz nodded. "They went through a portal."

"That's impossible!" Aeyris insisted. "Dark Eyes made it so!"

"No one was ever able to do it," Iz agreed. "Except Harry."

Harry's cousin, the wingless one, began to laugh. Her brother grabbed her and put his hand over her mouth, muffling the sound.

The Queen stared at Iz, dazed and dismayed.

As Aadon stepped into the portal he briefly imagined the worst case scenario on the other side. It was likely the young portal guides had all attacked each other on sight, and a mess of blood and bodies awaited them.

He stepped through on new ground, making room for the Wild One behind him where the portal was closing.

Aadon took in the sight before him. The biggest crowd of portal guides he had ever seen stood there, waiting. Several were sitting, but most stood motionless. All of their eyes were on Aadon. The

scene was so bizarre, so surreal. They looked weary, but peaceful, and stood side to side. Every portal guide they had sent through had stayed at the portal and waited for them to come through.

Aadon finally pulled his eyes away from their stare and looked about himself. High cliffs rose on either side, beautifully glowing with dawn.

"I've been to more planets than anyone ever has," Aadon murmured to the Wild One. "And I have never seen this place before."

"It's ours," the Wild One whispered back.

Aadon suddenly understood: the temperature of the planet they were standing on was deeply below freezing. The natural heat of the portal guides was made to withstand the coldness of the Void, and was adapted to colder climates. The air on this planet wasn't cold enough to bite like the Void, but cold enough that it counterbalanced the overheating of Wrath's flame, the cause of their madness. The temperature was absolutely perfect, Aadon hadn't even noticed immediately, because it wasn't cold enough to be uncomfortable.

This solution had never occurred to Aadon, because he had never been on a planet like this in all his travels, and he hadn't known that it existed.

"Amazing..." Aadon said softly. "Where did it come from?"

"The god I was telling you about made it," the Wild One told him. "It's called Fraizha."

The crowd was waiting.

The Wild One stayed behind Aadon. "Take the credit," he told Aadon. "I don't want it." Aadon wasn't particularly surprised; he doubted anything the Wild One did would surprise him anymore. Aadon turned to address the portal guides.

"Welcome!" Aadon said loudly. He was suddenly struck with affection for the bunch. They were mostly young, and had been manipulative

and lied to. Every one of them had lived a lonely, isolated life. "Welcome to Fraizha, may we forever be free from the Keep!"

A ragged cheer started up in the crowd as reality began to sink in.

"We are no longer forsaken!" Aadon continued. "There is now a God of the Portal Guides, and he has made this planet for us."

The older ones of the crowd looked skeptical, but the faces of the younger ones were beginning to shine with awe and excitement.

The Wild One continued to murmur to Aadon behind his back. "The mountains are riddles with caves, plenty of them. Enough that everyone can spread out as far as they like."

"You will find that this world is perfectly suited to us," Aadon interpreted loudly. "The temperature is exactly what we need to survive in peace. We can spread out across the mountain ranges in caves of our own. This world is a gift and all that's left for us to do is explore it."

"Who are you?" Someone called.

"My name is Aadon," he told them. "I am twenty six thousand years old, the last of the portal guides from an earlier era. I have a lot to teach you. This is the Wild One, you may have heard of him." He raised his arms in victory to the crowd, slipping comfortably into the role. "This is the beginning of a new time for us, the beginning of freedom."

They erupted into a genuine cheer this time. Many of them took off in flight, disappearing over the mountain ranges to explore. Some of them stood around, talking with each other, and the old confused ones from the lowest level of the Keep were cared for, moved to the wall to lean against it and sit up.

Aadon looked to the Wild One and they simultaneously took to the air. Climbing higher, they flew up and up the cliffs beside them, eventually finding themselves on the very top point, where they landed lightly on the ice to look down over the new world.

"That went well," the Wild One commented. "And you can call me Harry," he added.

Aadon looked over the beautiful mountains, the flying figures of the portal guides, and the rising sun.

"The sun-sickness?" Aadon asked.

Harry shook his head. "There will be none of that," he said without doubt. "Not involuntarily, at least."

"I'm optimistic, now that I see what this planet has to offer," Aadon said. "Though I still wonder how a few things will work out. The Queen will try to recapture us at all costs, how can we safely make any portals? The portal guides will become lonely here, what about families?"

"They can have families," Harry said logically. "The caves go deep into the mountains, and can be heated up to keep non-portal guides warm. That's why there are so many caves. Every portal guide can have their own so that when they are outside they can interact with each other and in their home where it's warm there will be no one to fight with. Because they can port, they can easily visit families on Origin or bring families here. Others wouldn't be able to go outside easily, not without some kind of warming spell. That's better than the Pit, where most of the inhabitants work there their entire lives and never see the sunlight."

Harry noticed that Aadon had stopped looking over Fraizha to stare at Harry intently. He stopped talking, looking uncomfortable.

He knows too much, Aadon thought. He doesn't sound as if he's repeating something, he sounds like he's just explaining it because he knows.

"Well," Aadon said. "I don't care if I ever see Origin again. This place suits me much better."

"Let's make a deal, then," Harry offered. "Stay here, take care of them, help them. They look up to you. Teach them to be proud of what they are. Lead them in the new beginning you spoke of."

Aadon considered this. He already had ideas for the new society they were to build... and someone had to lead them. He had more experience than any of the others, and they saw him as the one responsible for their rescue. If he spoke, they would listen.

"And what's your end of the deal?" Aadon asked.

Harry smiled grimly. "You take care of things on this end, and I will take care of the Queen and our other problems."

"Deal," Aadon said immediately, and they shook hands, "Though you've got the far worse end of the deal, my friend. I don't envy you."

Harry just shrugged. "Someone has to do it," he said, unknowingly echoing Aadon's thoughts from a moment earlier.

"The separate caves were the right idea," Aadon said. "We're solitary by nature. Our society will have to reflect that nature and be very loosely structured," he planned, "Though everyone needs to have respect for each other. I will organize meetings in which we can share what we found about the planet and make maps. None of us have ever been face to face unless we were trying to kill each other, and we're going to become united against those who would bend us to their will."

Harry looked pleased with this, smiling to himself.

I'm definitely going to keep a close eye on that one, Aadon thought. He's not telling the whole story.

Aadon had left to find a place of his own, leaving Harry alone on the mountaintop. On one hand, Harry's plan was going wonderfully, but he couldn't celebrate yet.

I still have to face the Queen, Harry reminded himself. I've done some pretty difficult things, but trying to convince the Queen to cooperate is going to be one of hardest. She's stubborn, convinced of

her own righteousness, and has thousands of people who will follow whatever she says. That's a bad combination. Harry jumped off the mountain and began to float down. When do I face her? I need to let the fact that I took off with the portal guides really sink in, but arrive soon enough that she's still panicked about it.

Landing among the others, he came to a good solution. He would sleep until he was no longer tired, and then he would get up and go. No point in waiting.

Harry was plenty tired. He slept deeply and well, and when he awoke to the fresh air and cool breeze, he stretched luxuriously, in a good mood. Then he remembered what he had set before him to do, and his good mood plummeted. This is going to be unpleasant.

Aadon had returned and was nearby.

"I'm about to leave," Harry told him. "Any advice?"

Aadon smiled a wide, sly smile. "Nothing you can use. I doubt you want her in pieces."

Harry laughed. "Aeyris and I aren't on the best of terms. I slept with her daughter."

Aadon checked to make sure Harry was serious, and then roared with laughter. "That's priceless," he said finally.

"Did you find a place?" Harry asked.

Aadon nodded. "There's a huge mountain not far away, the biggest I've seen so far. There's a huge plateau before it, and the caves within are very large and very expansive. The others had avoided it; I think they were leaving it for me."

Harry was nodding. "Yes, I know the place." He stretched his wings for flight. "Good luck."

"Good luck to you— you're the one who's going to need it," Aadon told him.

Harry ported into the Void, fighting against the wind. It affected him as usual; the glow that had protected him during Fraizha's creation hadn't returned since.

At Origin's side he steeled himself and ported into the Queen's Hall, imagining the exact spot he wanted to appear.

The Queen's Hall was bustling with people, huddled together and whispering frantically. As Harry had suspected she might, the Queen had put on the show of being in her throne, but her mind was somewhere else. She looked vacantly over people's heads.

It was Iz that noticed his arrival. "It's him!" Iz yelled. Nobody seemed to need ask who Iz meant. "Stop him right there!" Harry's infamy must have spread, because the regular crowd drew back from him while mages and Iz's people surged forward.

Harry was hyper aware of the fact that every one of Iz's people was specially trained to fight him, and that magic was glimmering on the hands of the mages, just waiting to leap.

He froze, waiting to see if they would act, knowing he could port out within seconds. There were no immediate orders, but Harry was afraid they would act on their own. Iz's people in particular looked affronted, and their normal professionalism was stained with a shade of animosity.

The Queen had gotten to her feet, strolling over while looking at him speculatively. She clearly enjoyed the tight spot he was in.

"Stop!" Madalena suddenly stepped forward. Harry quickly glanced around the room at everyone watching, over a sea of hostile, unfamiliar faces. Aeyris and Iz were there, and then behind Madalena he spotted Gray. Madalena was looking furious, and Gray concerned.

"Aren't you even going to listen to what he has to say?" Madalena demanded. Aeyris looked at Madalena as if seeing her for the first time, surprised.

Recovering quickly, Aeyris turned back to Harry. "Well?" she asked.

The moment was so serious, as everyone waited in suspense to hear what he had to say. Harry knew that if he wanted the Queen to work with him he would have to be respectful, especially with all her people there. But he could help hiding a little jibe in there.

"I've come to negotiate..." Harry said, and then added. "I want an agreement on certain... conditions," in the exact same way, with the exact same inflection he had said it to her last time they had negotiated, at the center of God's Landing, when he had traded for his own freedom. Last time she had been forced to bow to his will, and by the way anger flared in her eyes he knew that she hadn't forgotten it.

Harry thought Gray might have rolled his eyes, but other than Madalena none of the Queen's people had no idea he had just insulted her pride.

"You steal an important faction of my people," the Queen stated icily, "And now you waltz in here, expecting to negotiate with me?"

"I didn't steal anyone," Harry corrected. "They ran away. I just left the door open."

"The guards—" she began to say.

"Were unharmed," Harry interrupted her.

Queen Aeyris glared at him murderously. "How could you do this to us now? The Ice Lizards are impervious to our regular defenses!"

"Then listen to me very carefully," Harry said slowly. "You can try to hold me against my will, and might even manage to do so before I port out of here, though more likely I would escape. Either way the portal guides are far out of your reach. If you attack me now, or refuse to negotiate, I will leave and you will not hear from us for a long time. During which you will be without a single portal guide."

There was silence in the Hall as Harry waited for the Queen's response. They were straining to hear every word.

Refusing to admit that she had been forced to relent, Aeyris ordered Harry's would-be captors to step down. "You," she said to him. "Follow."

The crowd parted for them as Aeyris led him through a door near her throne into a large meeting room. She slammed the door shut forcefully.

Harry and Aeyris faced each other, preferring to stand. Aeyris' body was rigid, her hands clenched in anger. Harry tried to put on a show of being relaxed, but he was holding his breath.

"You don't understand, Harry," Aeyris said almost calmly. "The Pit can't run without the Cursed. They are vital to many of its functions. The business of cutting stone from nearby mountains can only be achieved by the strength of the Cursed, they are our best defenses, and without their portals we are cut off from the other planets with which we trade."

"Here's an idea," Harry said with sarcasm. "If you need them that badly, hire them."

"Hire them?" Aeyris repeated incredulously.

Harry nodded. "Instead of being slaves, trade for their services."

"They weren't slaves," Aeyris said. "They were dangerous; we had no choice but carefully control them to keep the rest of the Silent race safe."

"Believe me," Harry said. "To the portal guides, it's exactly the same thing. And for your defenses, you don't need the portal guides. Do you realize how many people you had devoted to controlling the portal guides? If you instead taught them to use the tricks they used on us against enemies you would have a formidable fighting force. After all, they've been fighting enraged portal guides all these years, after that everything else will be easy."

"Empires can't change overnight, Harry!" Aeyris said, frustrated.

"This one just did," Harry told her. "Are you ready to hear my terms now?"

Aeyris folded her arms and waited skeptically. "Very well."

"The portal guides are on a planet far away, where they can live among each other in peace. If they can't safely leave the planet, they won't be able to make portals. You, the rest of Origin, and all the others planets would suffer for it. I want your promise that you will not attempt to hold them against their will. Don't try to punish them for leaving in any way, for example not allowing their families to see them. They will be treated with respect instead of contempt. Hire them if you need them by trading fairly," Harry said, hoping he was remembering everything. "If you won't trade fairly, we will go somewhere else."

Queen Aeyris' response was to pick up the closest chair and hurl it to the floor where one of the legs broke off. She said nothing, the look on her face communicated enough. There was nothing she could do but agree, but there was a resistance in her, a pride that simply wouldn't bend. She couldn't stand being forced into doing anything against her will, and on top of that, Harry's presence itself was taunting her. He had somehow snuck into her world and turned it upside down, breaking all the rules and doing the impossible at every turn.

"It's pretty similar to the agreement we made before so that I would be free to protect Enna and the others," Harry noted. "Just on a bigger scale."

Aeyris continued beating chairs. Harry retreated and leaned against the wall.

Finally the Queen wore herself out and collapsed on the nearest intact chair, laying her head down on the table. When she finally looked up at him again, she was calm and collected.

"I am left no choice but to agree," she said stoically.

"Promise," Harry insisted. "Swear it on Dark Eyes."

For a moment Harry thought she was going to go back to destroying things, she had that look in her eyes again. She couldn't break a promise sworn on Dark Eyes.

"I swear on Dark Eyes," Aeyris said through her teeth, face red. "That I will follow your conditions. Now go away. I don't ever want to see your face again."

"You will," Harry told her, knowing they would no doubt have to negotiate further over time, iron out the details.

Harry ported away. He had things to do.

Author's Note: There's a short story about Gray and Ren as children on fictionpress, I'm going to add more backstories about characters there. The link is in my profile, click on where it says 'The Night Muse' and then on the story 'The Wild One's Hand'. These stories are going to be revealing about each character.

## Chapter Forty: Stone Guardian

Harry stepped into Dark Eyes' glass pentagon, where blue fire flickered ominously off the walls. The hard planes of the god's face were half brightly lit, and half in darkness. His eyes, nothing but pools of inky blackness, fixed upon Harry, and Harry resisted the urge to shiver.

This is my grandfather, Harry reminded himself. There were times when Harry felt sure that Dark Eyes was pleased, even proud of him, but there were also times when Harry couldn't forget that he was facing one of the most powerful gods, and the God of Darkness no less.

Dark Eyes leaned back in his armchair, disappearing into the shadows for a moment, and Harry took that as a signal to enter the room. As he approached the fire, Dark Eyes gestured casually with one hand and another chair rose languidly, almost fluidly from the floor and solidified. It had no back, for which Harry was grateful. He didn't think he could handle armchairs like his grandfather's without cramping his wings.

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Harry summarized recent events, even though he assumed Dark Eyes already knew. "The portal guides escaped The Keep without a hitch. None of the guards were harmed; I put them all in one of the cells. The planet's temperature was perfect. That worked just right. I went back to talk to Aeyris... that was a little harder. Iz saw me leaving through the last portal, so they were ready for me when I came. I talked with the queen privately and she agreed to my terms."

Dark Eyes nodded. "All very well."

Harry bit the inside of his lip. "What now?"

"Leave them awhile," Dark Eyes told him. "Take some time away from your planet."

"Now?" Harry asked, slightly surprised. "They've only just arrived."

"Give them time to move in. Take a break. You've worked hard recently," Dark Eyes said. He looked deep into the fire and continued in a more philosophical tone, "What's the point of having a People at all of you control everything they do?" he asked. "You might as well just play chess."

The idea didn't sit right with Harry, he felt kind of like he was abandoning them. But he had to admit, Dark Eyes did know what he was talking about.

"Believe me, they're tough. They can take care of themselves. Don't treat them like children," Dark Eyes said.

"Alright," Harry agreed. Dark Eyes was silent, and Harry got to his feet but as he was leaving Dark Eyes called after him.

"Grandson."

Harry turned around. Dark Eyes was staring at him mysteriously.

"Remember this," Dark Eyes cautioned him. "You are not invincible. You may have created a planet and freed your people successfully so far. But you are mortal yet, and you are constrained by the rules of mortality." And that was all he said.

Harry left feeling unsettled.

He took the opportunity to visit his mother— it was increasingly becoming his favorite thing to do. Everything else put so much pressure on him, and her rooms were like a haven from responsibility, where he could relax. While seeing Enna used to do the same thing, now it just made him feel sad and slightly panicked. So he avoided her.

Lily was always delighted to see him, and over the next few days she only mentioned Enna once, asking if he'd visited her. When he'd briefly shaken his head, she'd let the subject drop. However, Harry had the feeling she wouldn't let it lie for long.

His dreams were calm, filled with satisfied murmuring. Reassured that everything was well on his planet, he lingered with his mother longer than he had intended.

"What will you do now?" his mother asked as he was about to leave.

"I'm going to Fraizha," he said.

"After that... will you finally visit Enna?" Lily wondered. "I think it would do her good."

"I'll think about it," he answered, not making any promises.

Harry left Sky's End by porting directly into the Void and approaching Fraizha. He ported in near the cave Aadon had chosen for himself. Surprisingly, there were many portal guides standing around, and they didn't notice as he approached the cave.

On the large, flat plateau Harry had made, two portal guides were sparring, using long staffs of wood. The sticks would twirl through the air, wood cracking on wood, occasionally hitting one of the fighters.

Curious, Harry stepped up to the crowd. "What's this about," he murmured, and one of the others answered without looking away from the bout.

"Practicing restraint," he responded. "It's easy to snap the wood, so we have to be careful."

A moment later one of the fighters hit the other on the arm with the wood stick with considerable force. It broke with a loud crack. The blow didn't hurt the portal guide, he merely grinned. The other scowled, it was apparent he had lost. His turn was over, one of the others approached with a staff and a new fight started.

Pretty clever, Harry thought, leaving the crowd.

He entered the large cave. He was surprised to see the changes made already. A bonfire was lit in the middle of the cave, surrounded with a ring of rocks. The entrance to the cave was wide, and sunlight

streamed in so the glow was fairly weak. Large, thin slabs of rock leaned against the wall. Harry examined them momentarily. They were maps, etched out with the sharp razor edge of black feathers. The valleys were carved out, and mountains left high. The cave where he was standing was the center of the first map, surrounded by various symbols; he didn't see a legend explaining them.

The cave was mostly empty, but against a far wall a slim portal guide was kneeling, and Harry approached him.

Harry looked closer to what he was doing—the portal guide was holding several of his own feathers, using the sharp ends to engrave upon the curving stone wall. He was creating marvelous relief sculpture, with amazing detail. Harry was momentarily struck with the craftsmanship itself, but then took a step back to see what was actually being illustrated. It was the history of the portal guides, starting with The Gods in the Void, then the creation of Origin, Dark Eyes bringing the Silents to life, and soon thereafter the lighting of Wrath's Flame. Much of it was still sketched out on the wall ahead of him.

"Amazing," Harry murmured, but the artist was too engrossed in his work to do much but nod. "What's your name?"

The artist looked up, slightly annoyed, but then recognized him. "Kazerin," he supplied, and then peered closely at Harry.

"What?" Harry wondered.

"Just memorizing your face for later," Kazerin said.

"Oh."

Harry heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Aadon approaching. Kazerin turned back to his work.

"Harry," Aadon greeted him warmly. "I wondered where you'd taken off to."

Harry winced. "Hello Aadon," he said, getting to his feet. I may have delayed a bit too long, Harry realized. After all, all this time they don't know how things went with the queen. Well... we all make mistakes, even the gods. Especially the gods.

"How long since I left?" He tried to ask casually.

Aadon lifted an eyebrow. "Two weeks, give or take a couple days."

"Oh," Harry said. Sky's End always threw him off track.

"So how did things go?" Aadon inquired.

Harry grinned. "Well, the Queen is in one piece, and I got her to swear on Dark Eyes that she would agree to my conditions."

Aadon laughed. There was a change in him Harry immediately identified, a certain pride in his demeanor. He had always been dignified, but this was more joyful.

"Aeyris will not try to hold anyone against their will, and she won't punish them by withholding their families," Harry elaborated. "She'll have to work with us."

Aadon nodded. "Excellent."

"How are things here?" Harry asked.

Aadon smiled. "Going well. There are two clearly defined factions; there are the older ones, they don't care much about what we do. They moved into caves and we haven't heard much of them, but I think they're happy. The rest of them, the majority, have spent a lot of time here. They are the future of our kind. They want to participate in the building of our society."

"Tell me about it."

"We have been hunting game, of which there seems to be a sufficient supply. Truly, this planet is immense; we will be able to grow very much here. The ones with stone working abilities have taught some

of the others, and many have gone about cutting doors to cover the entry of their caves. Also, they sliced off large thin sheets of stone. Using our feathers we've used them as parchment, writing ideas and drawing maps. Those who wish to be easily found have marked their caves on the map... and then there's Kazerin."

Harry nodded.

"This is our main meeting room," Aadon explained. "Sometimes we meet outside, on the plateau we use for sparring. There's a smaller plateau above we use as a porting point. This system of caves is tremendous; a couple I use for myself, but many below we plan to use for storage. In this main meeting room we've gathered. I've been telling them our history." He gestured to the artist. "Kazerin was dismissed by the Queen's people because he wasn't a good fighter, and they never took much notice of his talents."

"I see."

"He intends on illustrating the entire story of the portal guides," Aadon explained, "All the way through to the birth of our god and our escape from imprisonment, for the future generations of portal guides. Providing there are any."

"There will," Harry assured him. I will see to it, Harry thought, then couldn't help smiling slightly, laughing at himself.

"Kazerin believes that this place will be, other than the hub of our society and the home of our appointed leader, a sort of temple to the Portal Guide God," Aadon explained.

"Oh," Harry said. A temple... to me?! The thought disconcerted him, and he put it aside.

"The youngest of us here is Olen," Aadon explained. "You're bound to meet him any second, he's right over there and he's taken to following me around. It's alright, he's very useful, but he asks a lot of questions. As well as being the youngest, he's also the only mage, so I keep him nearby. He's lived a very different life than the rest of us. When mage children were born 'cursed', they were allowed to stay

with their families in their home caves. So he grew up very sheltered. He's a very capable mage, but not a very strong portal guide, and so he's never truly lost control or hurt anyone. He has an innocence that portal guides are lacking. Besides Olen, there was only one other portal guide mage, but as I mentioned once he was kidnapped. Because of this, Olen found himself snatched from his home and put into the Keep with the rest of us. It was quite shocking for him. That's why he was in the Keep when we broke out, fortunately."

Thanks to Alexander, Harry thought morosely.

"Aadon!" someone called exuberantly. Aadon and Harry turned, and a young portal guide about the age of Shetha and Thamn came bounding across the large room, casting stone bouncing on his chest. Olen had a wide grin on his face, but he stopped several feet short of them to look at Harry curiously. Then his eyes lit up, "You're the Wild One! Wow!"

His enthusiasm was contagious, and Harry couldn't help grinning back.

"That's right," Aadon said, ruffling Olen's brown curls. "We have important things to talk about right now though." There was an obvious affection in Aadon's voice as the oldest portal guide spoke to the youngest.

With a pout of disappointment Olen bounded off again, though the expression didn't last long as he soon found someone else to talk to.

"Come, let's talk in private," Aadon suggested. Harry followed him through openings in the back of the cave into the caves beyond, a path where the incline gradually increased, until they were in the mountain above somewhere, and entered Aadon's private caves. There was a large boulder that Aadon easily rolled over the entrance. A magical fire burned steadily in the center of the room, without tinder and without smoke.

"Olen's doing," Aadon said, gesturing to it. A long rock had been sliced into a rough bench shape and placed beside the fire. They

seated themselves and Harry reached his bare toes toward the fire, warming them.

"What about the other end of things...I want to know what our god's plans are, how are things going to work out?" Aadon asked, looking concentrating on Harry.

Harry took a deep breath. "The idea is that the majority of us will live here, but they can leave and work on other planets, creating portals. We will build an outpost on Origin, where the other races can request portals, so we can send portal guides."

"What about the madness?" Aadon inquired. "Do they still have to work with the Queen's Hands? I can't see many of them wanting to do that."

"That's the beauty of the plan," Harry explained, grinning now. "Something I learned in my time with Queen Aeyris' daughter. See, her daughter is a healer."

"How interesting," Aadon said. "I'm sure Aeyris isn't proud of that."

"No, she's not," Harry said. "Have you ever heard of... a bond, sharing between Silents?"

Aadon nodded. "Very rare."

"When there's a bond between a portal guide and a healer, it stabilizes the both of them. If more of these bonds were created, the bonded pair could travel freely and create portals."

"That seems a bit of a stretch," Aadon pointed out. "How can you depend on these bonds being formed?"

"Just trust me," Harry promised.

Aadon sighed, but nodded. "I hope you know what you're talking about."

"I do," Harry said. "I have..."

"Help," Aadon supplied. There was something unfathomable in his expression.

Harry nodded.

"Help," Aadon said carefully, "From your grandfather, perhaps?"

Harry looked back at him blankly. Damn. He didn't think Aadon would figure out his secret, not so quickly. Damn, damn, damn. What do I do now?

Aadon was watching his reaction carefully. "I wasn't born yesterday. I've had some time to think about things, and once the idea occurred to me I knew it must be true. Don't deny it, I'll be insulted. I'm not a fool."

Harry just sat still, looking back at him, eyes wide. I'm not allowed to TELL them, Harry suddenly realized. But... I didn't, did I?

"I never said I was a god," Harry said stiffly.

Aadon raised an eyebrow. "No, you didn't. But all the clues lead to that conclusion."

Harry sat up straighter, looking him in the eye, not denying it. "Though, perhaps, if there was such a god..." he paused. "There might be something preventing him from saying so. For instance, some rules set by the gods themselves."

Aadon smiled, catching on. "Hypothetically of course." He looked very interested.

"Hypothetically, I suppose this god would have had some help from his grandfather, who may be the God of Darkness," Harry explained. "And his mother might be the Goddess of Love. Coincidentally, the Goddess of Love creates bonds like those we spoke of. She might be inclined to help, if her son were to ask."

Aadon looked impressed. "Well that would be fortunate, wouldn't it?" He winked.

Harry finally relaxed and smiled. "Please don't tell anyone," he implored.

"I won't," Aadon agreed. "And I don't think anybody else will figure it out. You haven't had much contact with them at all. You've been pretty good about that, actually."

Harry shrugged. "Not good enough."

Aadon sat very still, looking at Harry with a new intensity. He was trying to picture the person before him as a God, Harry knew. He shifted uncomfortably. I'm just a demigod, Harry thought, but didn't say it. He wanted Aadon to have the utmost confidence in him. Also, the less said the better. He didn't want to break any rules outright.

"You could have been hailed as a prophet," Aadon said. "But you chose to remain in anonymity. You were in charge of the entire escape plan, but you gave me the credit, and immediately disappeared. You care for us, but don't want to be involved. When we talked, you knew what you were talking about in a way that always managed to convince me to trust you. At first I thought that you are spoken with the portal guide god directly. But why would you not want to be recognized? I knew there must be an explanation."

Harry looked away. Was I that transparent? Perhaps. He decided to leave.

"I'm going for now," Harry said quietly. "I'll be around."

The older portal guide nodded.

Harry ported into the Void, flying steadily toward Origin. Fraizha was further away from the other planets, just far enough that in the madness of the Void it wasn't visible from the cluster of planets that predated it. It was almost a leap of faith, to fly away from the close planets into the storm, knowing Fraizha would be out there somewhere. The planets often seemed to have moved since he was

last before them, but they remained consistently distanced from Origin and by flying about you could certainly find the planet you were looking for.

He paused before Origin. This wasn't something he normally did, the Void wasn't the most pleasant place, but he did so for two reasons. For one, he wanted to take a good look at the planet, and secondly he was hesitating, stalling for time.

Origin itself looked the same as always, unchanged. He let it rotate before him, letting the Pit find him instead of searching for it. As he waited he noticed something peculiar; there were occasional glimmers of blue on the surface, appearing and disappearing. He blinked a couple times.

Portals, perhaps? Harry thought. Maybe since I've been coming into my own as the god of the portal guides I'm beginning to see all the portals, instead of just mine.

Distracted by this thought, he almost missed the right moment. The dark spot on the planet passed before him and he touched it, disoriented as everything dissolved around him and he found himself in his final destination.

Enna's room was dark and silent. He was momentarily perturbed, having expected to find Enna sitting there. The curtains around her bed were drawn shut. She must be sleeping.

Harry went to gently wake her, but something made him pause: a dark figure at the foot of her bed. At first he thought someone was crouched there, but then he realized it was a statue. Interested, he kneeled in front of it to take a closer look.

He was surprised to see it was an amazingly realistic statue of a Cursed Silent. The figure was crouched, arms crossed and resting on its knees. The statue was dressed as Harry was, in simple loose pants, and its wings were folded tightly to its back. Its face was turned up, expression stoic but there was something deeply intense about its eyes. The face was so lifelike, Harry half expected it to blink, but it

was made of black stone. Every detail was present, down to the eyelashes.

What's this doing here? Harry wondered. Why does Enna have it in her room?

Curious about its surface, he touched it. It was hard, smooth, polished, and surprisingly warm to the touch. Some of the black coloring came off onto his fingers, and Harry absent-mindedly wiped it on his pants. He gazed a few moments longer.

Harry stood and took a step back, turning to the bed and reaching to open the bed curtains, but his hand cramped. He pulled it back and looked at it, puzzled.

Something was wrong. The black hadn't come off; it now covered his fingers and part of his right hand. As he watched, the dark stain on his skin spread, moving down over his wrist. He grabbed his right hand with his left, and was shocked to feel hard, smooth stone, polished as the statue.

The statue. Something about the statue's hands caught his attention. They were looking pinker, more life-like.

Harry's left hand had been contaminated by the same blackness, and it was spreading faster now. Panicked, Harry tried to move his arms, to stop what was happening to him. Surely it was just covering his skin, and he would be able to wipe or crack off the hard layer.

It didn't respond, and continued to spread. His body began to freeze up, and it finally occurred to Harry that this was no thin layer. His body was turning into stone.

Harry let out a yell, thrashing and fighting against it, but his feet were rooted to the ground and his legs were locked, he couldn't move his arms at all any more and the creeping hardness was moving, making its way up his neck. He gasped, but couldn't take in any air and somehow he knew his lungs were now only rock.

The worst part was when it crept up over his face. Horrified, Harry could do nothing the parts of his body he was able to move dwindled away. He felt as if he was being covered and trapped by a suffocating mass.

Then it was done. His eyelids were frozen in place, and he could no longer even blink. Surprisingly, he could see.

Right in front of him, what had been a stone statue moments before got to his feet and stretched, now flesh and blood. There was a gray cast to his skin. The last bit of blackness was just disappearing from his face.

Harry saw something he hadn't noticed about the statue before: there was a casting stone around his neck. It was unlike any casting stone Harry had ever seen. What normally would be clear or slightly clouded transparent rock, looked an opaque chunk of rock polished into the shape of a casting stone.

What remained the same was his expression. It was blank and stoic and Harry found something about it unnerving. Without a word, the now living statue turned and left, leaving Harry in the silent and empty room.

In his head, Harry screamed.

Sorry this is a cliffhanger. The next chapter will be up very soon.

You may wonder where I've been. Well, I co-founded a company! So I've been very busy (for the evidence, visit aurorapaintedfaces(dot)com). Also I got a negative comment that bothered me a lot and I've been recovering. I know, that's kind of lame. I'm far too sensitive.

Thanks for all the reviews!

## Chapter Forty-One: Pretending

Harry drifted. Time lapsed, and although it seemed to have been forever, it must have been only minutes. Footsteps echoed in the hallway behind him, the door had been left open. The footsteps were quite urgent, and it was with long sweeping strides that Queen Aeyris herself entered the room and stood right before him. She emerged with a huge smile on her face, but it immediately faltered.

"They say you can hear me... I was hoping you would come traipsing in here," she said seriously. "And although the look on your face is in some ways gratifying, I don't think I can talk to you like that." She seemed unsettled, and if the panic on his face was anything like the panic inside, she should be.

This is a new level of low for you, Aeyris, Harry thought. You turned me into a statue! You can't just... do that to people!

"Will you do something about that?" Aeyris said, and stepped back.

Harry's view was restricted to what was right in front of him, which is why he hadn't seen them at first. The other ones. They filled his vision now, Harry quickly counted six. One of them must have been the statue he'd found before, but they all looked very much the same: Gray, sallow skin, the black wings of the Cursed, and dull opaque casting stones. Their black eyes were fixed on him. One reached out and touched his shoulder, and Harry's body moved of its own accord, stone scraping laboriously against stone. His spine bent and he was forced down into the statue's position, kneeling but looking up. He could feel his face rearranged into a blank expression.

Aeyris nodded. "Much better." She smiled down at him. "You're probably wondering who these fine gentlemen are. They're going to set everything right for me. You shouldn't meddle in my kingdom, Harry, it's impolite." Her eyes narrowed. "And you definitely shouldn't have involved yourself with my daughter." She threw back the bed curtains to show Harry an empty bed. "I had her move to another room. She thinks it's because of the ice lizards, but I was hoping it would be you who walked into my trap."

Having no choice in the matter, Harry stared at her stoically.

"Free his head," she ordered, and the same statue-man touched Harry on the head. A strange sensation passed over his scalp and down his face, as if he was surfacing from a pool of water, but it stopped at the top of his neck. He found himself gasping, able to blink. Beside him stood a horrifying man with a statue head on his shoulders.

Harry tried to port out of the room, but it didn't work. Too much of him was rooted to the ground. Harry didn't dare attempt to port into the Void; his statue weight would drag him down, and without anyone there to undo the spell he would fall forever. No sweet planet dreams this time.

"Why are you helping her?" Harry gasped. "I was just trying to help you out! All the portal guides!"

The closest one narrowed his eyes at Harry in an accusatory glare.  
"Your loyalty should be to the queen."

"You are a traitor," another intoned in a flat voice.

Harry tried to shake his head but was stopped at his neck, where the skin burned. "What the hell, Aeyris!"

She stood with her hands on her hips, looking at him thoughtfully, her luxurious blond hair tumbling over her shoulders. She was wearing a thick robe; she must have just risen.

How can someone who looks SO MUCH like Enna, be SO different? Harry wondered woefully. I remember when I thought of her as the Golden Lady. So much has happened since then.

"What makes you think you can keep me here?" Harry demanded.

"You can't port as a statue," The Queen said triumphantly. "Not even you, dear special one. If you could, I'm sure you'd be gone by now."

"The others—"

"Won't be coming for you," Aeyris interrupted. "I believed you before when you said I wouldn't be able to hold you against your will. Perhaps the others would have helped you escape like you did for them. They were on alert then, weren't they? But I'm sure by now you've gone back and assured them that everything is fine. No one is anxiously waiting for your return this time. I don't believe you would have told them you were sneaking back in here to visit your old lover, am I right? You took them away, but you have the right to skip in and out when you please?"

Harry wanted to protest, but the look in her eyes told him she probably wouldn't listen to a word he said. After all, she was right.

"I may as well explain," Aeyris said. "Let's start with a history lesson. It's one all queens are taught, but isn't common knowledge to the people. The second queen of the Silents, Eivah, was old when the Cursed first appeared. She had difficulty adapting to the new situation; queen-hood had been easy for her up till then. Unable to cope, she quickly passed on the empire to her daughter. Queen Aseea was one of our greatest queens. She was able to single handedly re-forge her empire to accommodate the arrival of new difficulties: first the Cursed, and then the healers... perhaps the healers shouldn't be counted among the difficulties, but I count them."

Like your own daughter, Harry thought, but didn't interrupt. He didn't see where the story was going.

"It was Aseea who appealed to our Creator God, Dark Eyes, for his help. Around the same time, she became pregnant with the next queen. The father of the new queen is normally not acknowledged, to keep the power from splitting, from falling to a male role. Aseea was an exception, even if she never outright stated who the father of her child was, everyone knew. It was her greatest mage and companion, Rauthan. In fact, her daughter and granddaughter both had mage capabilities, but were too busy to practice them and Rauthan's amazing powers weren't passed on any further. While he lived, Rauthan was completely devoted to Aseea and the empire. It was Rauthan that came up with the stone transformation spell."

"It is extremely difficult to cast spells on other living creatures," one of the statue-men added flatly. "Even if they don't have any mage abilities themselves, they still have more control over their own bodies than you do. You have to overpower their will, their inborn resistance to change. Even if you do manage to change someone into stone, it's near impossible to preserve them thus, so that they can be changed back in the same condition with which they left. It was a very formidable spell."

"I'm sure," Harry said sarcastically, not convinced of the merits of what was currently holding him frozen from the neck down. He wasn't making any friends among the bunch. They all seemed equally offended by his lack of appreciation.

"At the time, there were six Cursed among the mages," Aeyris continued. "That's the most there's ever been since. Since the first Cursed appeared randomly, it just happened that there were six created, but the mages didn't tolerate the Cursed in their aristocratic bloodline for very long. Except for your family, Harry; the Raschadin clan has consistently produced Cursed every few generations. The first six Cursed mages lived to protect Aseea, and after years of loyal service they made a great sacrifice for the empire."

"Does it have anything to do with turning into rocks?" Harry asked, rolling his eyes.

Aeyris glared at him. "Don't be a smartass Harry. You fail to understand the importance of the situation. The six mages were set in the stone guardian spell in case they were ever needed; this complex spell held them under certain conditions; they guarded various corners and important artifacts of the empire. If what they were guarding was placed in jeopardy, the spell releases them to defend it. Also, if the empire is ever in peril, the Queen can call on the Aseean Guardians to awake."

"You awoke them because I took off with your slave portal guides?" Harry asked.

"No!" Aeyris hissed, furious now. "I awoke them because you took off the portal guides and left me defenseless facing the threat of the Ice Lizards! They've already come after my daughter once before!"

Guilt momentarily stabbed Harry's stone heart. Not for freeing the portal guides, but because he hadn't been watching over Enna as much as he should have been lately.

"These portal guides," Aeyris said vehemently. "Are Ancients! They are millennia old; they are almost as old as Origin itself! They were among the first portal guides! Two of them, brothers, are even ancestors of yours!"

Harry couldn't help but be impressed. He looked at them quickly to see if there was any resemblance to his family, but they all looked ashy and corpse-like to him. Millennia of statue-hood hadn't done them any good.

"What now?" Harry asked tiredly.

"Now I have protection," Aeyris said. "And they will set my empire right again."

Harry widened his eyes in alarm. "You're not going to... you wouldn't go after my people, would you? You promised not to recapture them!"

"Your people?" Aeyris repeated, and raised an eyebrow. "I swore not to try and recapture the deserters, and I won't. The Aseeans may have other ideas, though. They will do what they deem to be right."

Harry looked to the statue-people, the Aseeans. "They escaped. They don't want to come back."

"It is not their fault," one of the Aseeans said amiably. "It is yours. You led them astray."

"What will you do?" Harry asked. His heart hurt. I thought I had finally freed them. I thought we were safe.

"We will find them," said one of the others. "We will convince them that their loyalty must be to their queen. If they do not listen to reason, we will use magic to encourage them."

Harry stared at them dully. There was something very wrong with the Aseeans. They just weren't normal. They were like... robots. They'll start searching planets. But will they find Fraizha?

"Sleep well, Harry," Aeyris said with a certain amount of satisfaction.

Harry wanted to plead with her not to leave him as a statue, but his pride wouldn't let him. It wasn't just being unable to move; there was something very deeply... wrong... with the transformation spell. It was like a very important part of him was dying as black stone enveloped his head, pulling him back into the nothing place where sounds were muffled and faces suddenly seemed unimportant.

Time passed.

Everything was quiet.

Nothing moved. Harry didn't breathe, his heart didn't beat, and his eyelids didn't blink. The world was still.

Eons later, the door scraped open. Harry had replaced the Aseean statue at the foot of Enna's bed, so he couldn't see who it was. His thoughts stirred. Who is it? Has Aeyris come back to tell me everyone's been found and they're back, locked away in The Keep?

His first clue indicating otherwise was a white bird that fluttered across his view and landed on his shoulder.

Poop on me and you're fried, feather-butt, Harry thought. This statue is an angry demi-god.

His second clue was a soft gasp; one that grabbed his attention would have and made him spin to look, had he been able to.

The sound of light feet moved across the floor, and suddenly Enna was kneeling before him, looking at him with her gold eyes. He drank the sight of her in; he'd missed that face, those eyes.

"Look Darling, it's Harry," Enna said to the bird with great surprise in her voice. "What's this doing here?" she called loudly.

Someone by the door answered. "You shouldn't be in here, Princess."

Harry immediately recognized the monotonous voice of the Aseeans. They didn't all go, then. One was left to guard Enna. Maybe one is guarding the Queen, too. That leaves... four or five. Still too many.

"I need to get to my things," Enna retorted. "What is this?"

"That is a statue, Princess."

"Yes, but why was this statue made? What is it doing here?"

"You must ask the Queen these questions, Princess," The Aseean responded.

"Leave," Enna said.

"Princess—"

Enna turned away, so Harry couldn't see the expression on her face, but her voice was firm as she insisted, "Close the door. I have to get some things."

There was a pause, and then the door closed.

Under her breath, Enna muttered, "Creepy bastard," as she turned back to Harry. She bit her lip thoughtfully, and then sank back on her heels to the floor, folding her legs comfortably.

"I've missed you, Harry," she said quietly.

Harry was shocked. Does she know it's me?! But he didn't see the understanding in her eyes. Then he realized that she was just

pretending, telling his statue things she would say to him if he were there. If only she knew.

"I'm sorry I was so fast to judge you," she continued. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. But why didn't you come back? Haven't I suffered enough?"

Harry was ashamed.

"I don't like how I live," she continued. "Before I met you, I didn't know any different. But now..." she was almost gazing through him. "I don't want to be pathetic! I don't like sitting around, scared to leave my room, knowing it's me, knowing it's because I'm sick in my head!" Harry was surprised by her vehemence. "I want to be strong! I want to be a real person not a..." she faltered. "Not a shadow of a person."

She contemplated quietly, then reached out and touched his face. Her hand didn't turn black, and she wasn't trapped as he had been, the spell that held him in stone wasn't the same.

"I remember when I fell in love with you. When you first walked in I was intrigued because you were different, and I was willing to leave my rooms just because I would see you again. But it was up on the mountain, when we were supposed to fly. Suddenly I was so afraid, I couldn't move. I know it's all in my head, that it's because I'm a healer, but I felt completely frozen. You picked me up and held me and everything was suddenly okay. That was when I fell in love with you."

Harry remembered that night.

Enna sighed. "Lush apologized to me." Harry was surprised. "Though I'm not sure if it was for my sake." He wasn't surprised. "She told me that if forgive and forget everything entirely, things can go back the way they were. I'm trying really hard. I dream a lot. I dream that the Goddess of Love is talking to me, and she's so sweet, but she hasn't been able to help. I'm just not strong enough to let it go. And I don't think I can be strong enough without you, but nothing can go back the way it was until I'm able to let it go! It's a cruel trap."

Harry ached for her. He wanted nothing more that moment then to come to life, and reach out to her.

The quiet moment ended as the door snapped open. Enna jumped and turned to look. "Mother!"

"Enna, you were told not to be in here!" Aeyris said. Harry could tell she was annoyed, and slightly flustered to find Enna sitting before his statue.

"I came to get my favorite dress."

"Well get it and go back to your new room immediately," the Queen said authoritatively. "From now on, ask to have things brought to you."

"Not before you tell me why there's a statue of Harry in here!"

Aeyris thought quickly. "One of the artists made it, I can't imagine why. It's a statue of the empire's most infamous traitor; we can't have that lying around so I had it put in here. I was going to destroy it."

"... Can't I have it?" Enna asked hopefully.

"Enna, we both know that's not a good idea," Aeyris said in a reprimanding tone. "The last think you need is his face looking at you every day."

"I suppose not," Enna said, but her expression quietly disagreed.

"Please go. You're safer where no one knows to find you," Aeyris stated and Enna relented.

After Enna was gone, Aeyris hissed at the Aseean Guardian, "You shouldn't have let her come in here! For Dark Eyes' sake, get him out quickly!"

"Where should I put him, your highness?"

Aeyris paused, considering. "My closet. We can't have anyone see him. Least of all Madalena... I used to think she was dedicated to me, but I think if it came down to me or her family it's clear she would pick her family. She's fiercely loyal to them. If she saw him, she may very well do some research and figure out that it's a spell. She's very bright. That's why she worked for me, she's the best."

Harry found himself lifted with ease, an unsettling experience as his sense of balance was noticeably missing.

"Can't you port right into my chambers?" Aeyris asked.

"Not since Dark Eyes willed it impossible," the Aseean responded.

"Harry can do it," Aeyris said impatiently.

"I find that hard to believe," he responded. "It isn't doable."

"Just move quickly," she ordered.

The halls were a blur, and unfortunately devoid of faces. Harry remembered that Enna's rooms were very close to the Queens. He was disappointed... if someone would only see him, word of it could get to his aunt. Maybe Enna would tell Gray, and Gray would tell Madalena.

But Aeyris wouldn't let that happen. She's clever. She'll hide Enna away somewhere and claim it's for her safety, and no one will be there for her to tell. Poor lonely Enna. No wonder she talks to that bird.

The Queen's closet was immense, but when the door shut he was enclosed in darkness.

Did Dark Eyes know? Harry wondered. Was he trying to warn me?

## Chapter Forty-Two: The Forgotten

Harry had felt detached from reality before, but when the door was closed and he was surrounded with inky blackness, he lost all grip on it entirely. Time and space lost meaning, and he was no longer a person but a floating consciousness, vaguely aware of the surrounding world.

Am I dreaming or awake? He sometimes wondered. He was unable to tell the difference. He couldn't feel or see anything, and without anything to hold his attention with his body, his mind wandered further and further.

Normally his dreams were filled with many murmuring voices, the occasional fleeting image, never much substance. But as he was drawn more into that world, things became clearer. The fleeting images were suddenly whole pictures. Harry came to understand that he was connecting deeper with the minds of His People. Through the minds of the portal guides, he watched them building their homes. He saw Aadon through their eyes, how much they respected him.

He feared for them and their fragile liberty.

At least he knew they were still safe. Harry watched Kazerin move steadily around the wall of the great meeting room, carving doggedly, creating a masterpiece. He would go down in history for that epic artwork... if the Fraizhans remained free.

Harry still had a hard time discerning the passage of time, since he didn't know how long it was taking Kazerin to work on the wall.

Aeyris came and went from her closet, in short blasts of light that blinded him as well as woke him up. She didn't change in there, but took her clothes and left. One day she absent-mindedly tossed her robe over his shoulder and left it there a couple of days. This was an insult Harry felt he would need to revenge one day.

He thought of Enna too, and what she had said, not knowing he could hear her. Harry was surprised to hear that Enna had heard his mother speaking in her dreams.

Could I do that? He wondered suddenly. If they reach out to me in their dreams, maybe I can reach back?

Harry reached out to their minds, but remained on the fringes. They're close-minded people, he finally concluded, they don't trust anyone, not even me yet.

So Harry wandered Fraizha, jumping from mind to mind, slowly giving up on the idea. Despite the fact that they sent out little thoughts like prayers to him continuously, their minds were closed to him. Especially Aadon, the one he most wanted to reach; his mind shut like a clam. Even Aadon talked to him though, though they were more specific little murmurs, along the lines of, "This is going well, that was a good idea Harry," and "I do hope you know what you're doing." Aadon was probably just thinking to himself, not knowing that Harry would be receiving these thoughts.

I should tell him next time I see him, Harry thought. He'd probably like to know that I can hear him. And maybe he'll do it purposefully, keep me updated.

Suddenly he stumbled upon a new mind, one that was wide open, and he fell right inside. The person was dreaming.

Harry found himself standing in the shadows of a kitchen, one inside The Pit, very similar to his aunt Amanda's. Someone was sitting in front of him, someone he had recently met.

It was Olen.

Unlike the others, young Olen didn't have up barriers of mistrust. Now his innocence was working in Harry's favor, allowing him access to the young portal guide. I can send a message to Aadon through him, Harry realized.

First he quietly observed.

There was a second Silent in the dream, busy around the kitchen. She was female, Harry judged her to be about nineteen. She was one

of the slightly chubbier Silents Harry had ever seen, as a whole the species was very sleek and aerodynamic. A series of memories flashed before Harry. Her name was Raina, and even though she was a mage, she most wanted to be a cook. She was ten years older than Olen, his only sibling, and he had grown up following her around, participating in her cooking experiments. He always wanted to help, so she would set him to roasting things with breaths of Wrath's flame. Harry was amazed with his control. Olen was very proficient at not over burning the food, Raina seemed to trust him explicitly.

Harry watched them a while, not wanting to interrupt. He was also enjoying the quiet domestic moment, even if it wasn't his own.

The door suddenly opened, and Raina and Olen looked up, getting to their feet. Olen shrank back, and it occurred to Harry that this dream might be a memory relived. The ominous figures in the doorway were there to grab Olen and transport him off to The Keep, the most traumatic experience of his young life.

Harry decided to intervene. He stepped through the Keep Guards in the open doorway, and they disintegrated. Olen stared at Harry, looking confused.

He doesn't know what he's looking at, Harry decided. I have to define it for him. So Harry visualized what he wanted to look like: himself, large black wings arched around himself. Stealing the idea from his grandfather, Harry clothed himself in a long dark cloak, with a large hood that went over his head and cast a mask of shadows over the upper half of his face so that he wouldn't be recognized. It wasn't really logical to the flow of the dream; the bright light in the kitchen should have revealed his face, but Harry decided it wouldn't be so, so that's what Olen saw. Harry also found himself to be glowing blue-violet, as he always did when he exercised any of his demi-god powers.

"Wow!" Olen said, "You're him! The god Aadon told us about!" Raina had disappeared, no longer part of the dream. Or rather, now that Harry had influenced it, the vision.

"Yes," Harry acknowledged. "I need you to give Aadon a message for me."

Olen nodded solemnly, eyes wide.

"Tell him I said not to let anyone leave Fraizha, not even into the Void. The Queen twisted her promise and we are being searched for. Be on alert in case they show up here."

Olen nodded again, and the dream faded away.

Harry wanted to know what Aadon's reaction had been, and waited for some time, but it wasn't until much later that he saw. He wasn't able to actually look through Olen's eyes, as Harry had been able to do with Enna. Harry understood that he was seeing Olen's memory of the scene.

First thing in the morning Olen had sought out Aadon, trying to get his attention. Aadon had been busy with something, but when he saw how Olen was patiently waiting he took a moment to talk with him. "What is it you wanted to tell me, Olen?" he asked.

Olen looked at him seriously. "I have a message for you from the portal guide god. He came to me last night in a dream."

Harry and Olen had both expected Aadon to be surprised and impressed, but he merely raised an eyebrow.

Uh oh, Harry thought. Maybe Olen is known for having a wild imagination.

Aadon didn't seem to know what to say without hurting Olen's feelings. Olen didn't seem to notice, he scratched his head and wondered in a perplexed tone, "What I can figure out though, is why his voice sounded so familiar?"

Aadon's eyes widened, and he grabbed Olen by the elbow and pulled him into a secluded corner, suddenly taking him very seriously.

"What is the message?" Aadon pressed.

"He said," Olen told him, "to warn you that..." he concentrated, trying to recall my exact words. "That the queen has... twisted her promise, and that we are being searched for. You're not supposed to let anyone leave Fraizha, not even into the Void. And they might even show up here."

Aadon considered this. "How could they be coming through the Void? We took all the portal guides with us when we left."

"He didn't say," Olen responded.

"He's always been right so far," Aadon said. "I trust him. Now Olen, be sure if you have any more of these dreams to tell me right away, alright?"

Olen nodded vigorously, eyes wide and honest.

Harry was pleased and left Olen's mind, only to fall right into another one. He immediately was hit with a feeling of extreme paranoia. This new mind didn't have the naivety of Olen's, rather it felt as if it had been... pried wide open, and Harry had been sucked in my accident. In fact, this new portal guide had few original thoughts of his own, and as there wasn't much of a personality to get in the way, Harry blinked and found himself looking into a small white room. It was Spartan, furnished with only a narrow bed, a table and single chair. Harry sat on the small bed and looked across the room into a mirror over the table.

Harry was shocked to see his own reflection staring back at him with dead eyes.

Harry was totally baffled. What is this? He thought. How did I get here?!

Harry stared back at the haunting reflection, and abruptly noticed some differences, enough to know it wasn't himself he was looking at after all. It was Alexander, his cousin, the one who looked so much like him but Harry had never been given the opportunity to get to know him.

Alexander! Harry thought. Who's done this to you?

A sound behind them caught their attention, and Harry and Alexander turned to see. A door on the back wall was opening, and someone was standing in the threshold...

Harry blinked and found himself looking at Aeyris standing in a doorway. For a second he thought she was the one with Alexander, but he was mistaken. Aeyris had opened the door to her closet, waking him, and had seamlessly replaced the person open the doorway to Alexander. The identity of his abductor hadn't been revealed.

Damn your timing! Harry thought at Aeyris. And damn you too, come to think of it!

There was an Aseean with her, who pulled Harry out of the closet and into the bright room. Mercifully, he released Harry's head, and stepped back.

Aeyris stood in front of him, dressed simply, regarding him silently. They seemed to be waiting.

Harry wasn't about to waste his opportunity and his unfrozen vocal chords. "Damn you Aeyris," he said hoarsely. "You've gone too far."

Her eyes widened momentarily. She sighed. "You may be right."

Harry blinked in surprise. "What was that?"

The Queen avoided his gaze. "It hasn't been sitting right with me lately, you being locked as a statue in my closet, that is. See Harry, I needed you out of the way, and I thought that this would be a relatively simple way to do it. Nothing else seems to work on you, and I figured this way no one would get hurt, or even know about it. But I can't get the look on your face out of my head... the way it was frozen when the spell first hit you."

"How long?" he asked. She must have stewed over this a long time. It must have been hard for an idea like this to get through her thick skull.

"Three months," she said, knowing immediately what he was asking.

"You were wrong," Harry told her, "About no one getting hurt. This is hurting me. You can't understand what it's like."

He looked at Aeyris. Her demeanor toward this situation had changed since their last meeting; some of her self-righteousness had drained away. The look in her eyes was remorseful, but her spine was straight, tall and proud.

"Even if I wanted to change the Aseeans minds, I don't think I could; they're on a mission," Aeyris said, but then added quietly, "Not that I would. I still think the portal guides should return to the Keep."

Harry didn't know what to make of it, or what else she may have said had the door not opened right then.

Four more Aseeans entered the room, quickly surrounding him. One must still be watching Enna.

"Well?" Harry inquired sarcastically, "How's the noble crusade coming along?"

Harry was beginning to see the differences in them. Despite their similarities they were of different ages and of slightly different features. The oldest of them was the leader. The youngest held the biggest resemblance to one of the others, close enough to be brothers. My ancestors, probably.

The leader narrowed his eyes at Harry. "We have been unsuccessful," he announced. Inside, Harry cheered. "But now you are going to help us."

Harry blinked. "Um... no? I'm not." He glanced at Aeyris. She was watching almost resignedly.

The spell reversed itself, leaving his body as it had come. Harry found himself standing, released in the precise moment he had been trapped. His body was flooded with adrenaline, and panic threatened to overwhelm him. He looked down at his hands as the black disappeared from his fingertips, leaving behind an ashy tone.

It's over, he told himself. Get out of this place. Without hesitating, he ported into the Void, leaving them behind.

A moment later, he felt a hand on his shoulder, spinning him around. Harry's eyes widened. They slipped through the hole I made in Grandfather's barrier!

The look the lead Aseean gave him said it all: You can't get rid of us so easily.

Harry headed for the nearest planet, diving into it.

He found himself standing on a beach. It was much like any beach he'd seen except for one big difference: the water was red, red like rust, or dried blood. A moment later they followed, appearing around him in a circle.

Harry looked at them steadily, thinking quickly, running ideas through his head. How to escape them? They waited patiently.

He'd had plenty of time to think over the last couple months, and there was something he wanted to say to them. "I think I actually understand you," he said sadly. "I think I know what made you this way."

They ignored him, except for the youngest, who looked at him curiously.

Harry continued. "You were the first portal guides, and people treated you with revulsion and fear. So you found purpose for yourself by devoting yourself to your Queen. Then you submitted yourself to Rauthan's spell. It might even work alright for short periods of time, even if it is an awful experience. Something went wrong, I don't think you intended stay like that for very long. But the spell doesn't let go

unless it's triggered, and people avoided you, and the Queen never needed your help, so you were left behind and forgotten. I'm sure you felt betrayed. Your time is long over; your families are gone for millennia. And as you remained statues all that time, part of you died."

Harry made eye contact with the youngest Aseean. "Perhaps it was your soul," he suggested.

To Harry's left, two of the Aseeans suddenly crumbled, turning into dust on the wind, dust that quickly disintegrated. Harry looked at them in alarm, and realized that was their way of fading away. They had lost the will to live; something Harry had said had rung true.

The youngest stared at him. "I had a sister."

Harry looked back at him silently.

"She's your ancestor, not me," he continued. "We grew up together, the three of us, before we were changed. Everything was different then." He turned away from Harry, walked to a nearby rock and sat down heavily. "It still hasn't sunk in that I'll never see her again."

"Get up!" The leader yelled at him. "Do your duty!" He was ignored.

Harry took advantage of the moment's distraction to port back into the Void, speeding away from the planet. He glanced over his shoulder. Two of them were still following him.

Well that worked, halfway, Harry thought. What do I do now? The best way to get rid of them was to fly deeper in the Void and lose them there. But Fraizha was out there somewhere, and they might be alerted to its existence.

He flew around for a while, circling, unable to outrun them.

As he flew by, a spark of light caught his attention. It was line of brightness, like a doorway barely cracked open. Harry twisted midair and lunged toward it. The door opened and he slipped through, slamming it shut behind him and replacing the open padlock.

In the round room at Sky's End, Harry's Grandfather stood waiting for him.

Harry leaned against the door, letting out a sigh of relief.

"Did you know what would happen to me when I left?" Harry asked after he caught his breath.

Dark Eyes shook his head. "No. I knew Aeyris was plotting something, but I didn't yet know what it was."

"I couldn't get away," Harry said.

Dark Eyes nodded. "And I'm not allowed to interfere." He smiled slightly. "That is, not directly. I might have made Fraizha unreachable unless you know it's there, however. And I left the door to the Void a little open."

Harry grinned back. He was quickly catching on to the ways of the Gods. It was all a game, a game of rules where the object of the game was to find ways to get around them, or break them without getting caught.

"What will you do now?" Dark Eyes asked.

"The thing they'll least expect," Harry said and quickly strode across the circular floor and to the outside door. "Thanks," he called, and Dark Eyes raised a hand in farewell.

Harry leapt from the platform outside, floating down toward the world below. He ported, closing his eyes and picturing Enna as clearly as possible. When he opened them, he was in a room he'd never seen before, but Enna stood only a few feet away. Other than Enna, the room was empty; her guardian must be waiting outside.

The last thing they'll expect of me after escaping is to turn around and come right back.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, Dark Eyes,” she exclaimed, not realizing the irony of her words. “Harry!”

Harry quickly swept her up into a hug. “Hey!”

“Where have you been?” she asked, squeezing him back. “You haven’t come to see me in so long.”

“Most recently?” he asked. “I’ve been locked in your mother’s closet. I did come to see you, but she had set a trap for me and I was turned into a statue.”

Enna blinked at him in surprise. “She did? How horrible! A statue? I saw you! I...” she trailed away.

“Expressed your thoughts very eloquently,” Harry assured her with a grin. She smiled back.

Suddenly the door slammed open. “Enna—” Aeyris strode into the room and stopped to gape, seeing them in each other’s arms. “What is going on here? What are you doing back so soon Harry? Only three of the Aseeans returned, and they said they lost you.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not easy to get rid of.”

“Mother, how could you?” Enna demanded. “You turned him into a statue and let me believe he hadn’t come back for me?”

Aeyris ignored her, and narrowed her eyes at Harry. “I told you to stay away from my daughter.”

Harry stepped in front of Enna and walked toward the Queen, getting up right in her face.

“I am not one of your subjects,” Harry told her. “And I will never listen to you.”

Then he ported away.

Moments later he was in the main meeting cave of Fraizha, where he quickly walked in a circle around the fire, setting spells with his casting stone. Then he waited.

He hadn't merely ported out of Enna's room. He had opened a portal, right in front of the Queen. As he had expected, Aeyris had stepped toward her daughter after he left, and walked right into it.

She appeared next to the fire, within the spell he had created to keep freezing air of Fraizha at bay. She looked at him with a bewildered expression on her face, and he immediately closed the portal, removing her only way out.

"It's time you learned a lesson," Harry informed her.

## Chapter Forty-Three: A Secret Place

Aeyris gasped. "What have you done?" She looked around. "Where have you taken me?" Through the wide cave opening, beyond the plateau was a stunning view of endless white capped mountain ranges.

"This is Fraizha," Harry told her. "The portal guide planet."

She frowned. "The portal guides are from Origin. They don't have a planet."

He grinned. "They do now!"

Then he pointed down. On the ground, in a loop around Aeyris and the large bonfire, was a thin blue line. "See this line? If you step over it, you will freeze to death."

Almost as if she couldn't help herself, Aeyris stretched out her hand curiously toward the line. Once her fingers crossed it, she jerked them back and curled them against her chest. They had turned slightly blue. "You're not kidding!"

Harry nodded. Fear entered her eyes. "What's this about? Are you trying to kill me?"

"No that's just the normal temperature on Fraizha," he said.

She was smart; it only took her a few moments to realize what this meant for them. "So that's how you did it!"

Around the cave, people were turning to stare at the first female to ever stand on Fraizha. On the plateau outside, the most popular stomping ground, the portal guides noticed something was up and began filing into the cave, silently surrounding them.

They parted for Aadon, who strode forward, eyes flashing between the queen and Harry. He walked up next to Harry, and quietly asked, "What's going on?" But then his brow lowered in concern as he took a

second look at Harry. “Are you alright? Are you sick? You don’t look so well.”

Harry winced, glancing down at his gray-hued skin. He must really look bad for the fact to take precedence over the sudden presence of the Queen appearing on their planet. “Something she did to me,” he said, gesturing toward Aeyris, who looked somewhat ashamed. “But I feel better already; I think it will go away.”

“Maybe we should talk in private and you can tell me everything,” Aadon said.

Harry agreed, and they began to walk away.

“Harry!” Aeyris wailed after him. “Don’t leave me here!”

Harry turned to the crowd. “This is a prisoner of mine,” he said loudly. “You can stare at her all you like, but don’t touch her.” He looked back to Aeyris. “Well, for your sake I hope they listen to me.” He knew they wouldn’t touch her, but he didn’t want her to be too comfortable.

Harry and Aadon stepped into the hallway beyond. It was empty, as everyone was now in the main meeting room. They put their heads together and spoke in low voices.

“Harry, who is that?” Aadon asked, and Harry remembered that Aadon hadn’t been out of the Keep in Aeyris’ lifetime, and therefore had never seen her before.

“That would be Queen Aeyris,” Harry said wryly.

Aadon raised his eyebrows. “She’s prettier than I expected. How did this happen? I got your message.”

“I’ll start at the beginning,” Harry said. “Have you ever heard of the Aseean Guardians?”

Aadon looked blankly back at him, but then something registered. “When I was a small child, before I was a risk for society, I lived with my family in the upper Pit. There was this rumor about a statue that

had been placed in the Queen's Hall. They called it an Aseean Guardian and the rumors were that it had been a real person once, back in the time of Aseea. But once people started really enquiring about it, the statue disappeared. The Aseean Guardians are just legends. Nothing survives that long."

"It's not just a legend," Harry corrected him. "They're real, and Aeyris woke them up. She turned me into one of them; that's why I look so... gray. I don't think it was long enough to have any permanent effects though."

"She could do that?" Aadon looked surprised. He did know Harry was born of gods, after all.

Harry sighed. "Yes. It's really embarrassing, but once she turned me into a statue there wasn't much I could do. The Aseeans were looking for you to bring you all back, that's why I ... that's why a warning was sent. But I'm getting sidetracked. Remember I said that I slept with Aeyris' daughter?"

Aadon nodded.

"It wasn't just a one night thing. Enna was really upset when I didn't come back to see her, and despite what she comes from, she's a very sweet girl. So I went back," Harry admitted. "I probably shouldn't have, since it put all my accomplishments so far at risk. That's why I didn't tell you... it was a little selfish of me. I was over confident. I was there all of two minutes when I got trapped by the statue spell, and then spent the next three months shoved in the back of the Queen's closet."

Aadon shook his head incredulously.

"I slept a lot of the time, and when I sleep I... hear voices," Harry said, wondering how to explain it. "Do you ever find yourself talking to me?"

"Talking to you?" Aadon repeated.

"You know, in your head, without even meaning to. Just thoughts."

"Maybe," Aadon said thoughtfully.

"Well most of the portal guides do," Harry explained. "I know, because when they do, I hear it. Even you." Seeing that Aadon understood, Harry added, "Sometimes it works both ways... especially when someone is open-minded like Olen... and that's enough about that." Harry was uncomfortable talking about demigod matters. "So when they searched for a couple months and couldn't find any portal guides, they decided to release me and then follow me where I go. We played a nice little game of chase... there were six Aseean Guardians to begin with, and now there's only four. In the end I lost them and headed back to Origin to tell Enna what had happened. With her usual horrible timing, Aeyris came in, and I lost my temper and set up a trap for her. Call it payback." Harry narrowed his eyes. "Though I'm not sure there is a way to avenge being turned into a statue without turning her into one, and it's unlikely she'd survive it." He listened for a moment to the murmuring coming through the doorway to the meeting room. "They'll recognize her, even without her pretty outfits on. You don't think they'll hurt her, do you?"

Aadon shook his head. "They may want to, but you said not to. They're a good bunch. They might have a few choice words for her though."

"Nothing wrong with that," Harry said.

"What will you do with her now?" Aadon asked. "Did you have anything specific in mind?"

Harry sighed again. "Sure. I've got plenty of ideas. The problem is," he paused, glancing around to make sure they were still alone, "Remember how I insisted none of the guards in the Keep got hurt? It's much the same. She's not one of... mine. For instance, Wrath couldn't just come in here and kill someone. There are rules. Gran—Dark Eyes won't interfere I think, but only because he taught me to know better. I may have brought her here, but I haven't hurt her in any way, other than her pride. And since I brought her here, if she got hurt it would be like I did it, by bringing her to harm. I would be

responsible. That can't happen. I don't need to bring any attention to myself. I'm toeing the line sometimes as it is."

Aadon nodded. "I understand. So she's untouchable... but she doesn't know that, does she?"

Harry grinned mischievously. "We could let her squirm a bit, couldn't we?"

He reentered the meeting hall to see how things were moving along. Aeyris spied him coming in, and gave him a panicked look. It was ironic; he was the most infamous traitor of her realm, she had always hated him, but in this situation she saw him as her only help. Harry hadn't decided what to do about that yet.

The crowd let him through. "What's going on?" Aeyris asked.

"We're trying to decide what to do with you," Harry replied honestly, but then stroked his chin as he added speculatively, "We want to come up with something really good."

"Harry, I know you hate me." Aeyris bit her lip. "You have every reason to hate me. I see that. But... if I die, it will start chains of suicide. Losing a Queen is catastrophic for Silent society; it never goes down very well. I know you care for Enna, but you have to admit there is no way she would be prepared to replace me."

"We'll see," Harry said. He turned to the crowd. "As some of you may have realized, this is Queen Aeyris. If you have any complaints about the way you've been treated in the past, I'm sure she'd love to hear them now." Then he ported away. He trusted Aadon would keep an eye on her.

Harry ported on the very top of the mountain. It was the highest peak, even from the plateau you were looking down onto many of the surrounding mountain ranges. He had made it purposefully, knowing it would be the perfect meeting place for them.

The mountain had the two plateaus, the meeting hall, the storage rooms, a place for Aadon, and many other guest rooms besides. All

those were far below him now. The plateau was barely visible, because of the slope of the mountainside.

What Harry didn't have was a place all his own.

Harry looked around, making sure nobody was around to watch what he would do next.

He jumped, floating down about twenty feet from the very top of the mountain, and landing again on its side. Kneeling, he pressed his hand into the ice. The heat of his hand instantly began melting it, leaving a neat handprint. His hand passed through the ice until it was touching the rock itself. His hand began to glow. Underneath it, the surface of the mountain writhed briefly. He held his hand there longer, concentrating, and suddenly a hole opened up, widening and widening until it was large enough for him to slip through.

Inside the tip of the mountain, unknown to the others, he had just created his own secret cave. It was circular at the bottom, but came up in a peak above him, echoing the shape of the mountain outside. Behind him the rock wall closed, as if the gap had never existed. Harry touched his fingertips to his casting stone absentmindedly, and a fire sprang up in the middle of the room. It was a magical fire like the one Aadon had in his caves. It needed no tinder, and made no smoke, but it cast a flickering light and immediately began to warm the room.

To the side of the fire Harry touched the floor and it promptly buckled up, the stone rising and reshaping itself into a large round plateau shape.

Warm, safe, and completely exhausted by his efforts of the last few minutes, Harry lay down onto the bed of his new home, too tired to care that it was made of stone. With a sigh he fell into the first deep, dreamless sleep he'd had for three months.

He slept for almost twenty-four hours.

Upon waking up well rested, Harry left his cave. His cave didn't have any openings and he didn't bother to make one. He just ported

directly to the small plateau above the main cave entrance the others were using as a porting point.

The first thing he did was check on Aeyris. She stood where he had left her, beside the fire. Little of the scene had changed. She looked tired, as if she had barely slept at all, and her dress was a little dirty and her hair was unkempt. She didn't notice him looking in on her. A portal guide Harry didn't know stood before her, addressing her. Her eyes were on him, even if they were slightly unfocused. Harry didn't bother listening in, but turned and jumped off the plateau and soared into the valley below.

It was green there, though still very cold. It was teeming with life, plants and animals that thrived in the cold climate. Harry appreciated them all the more, knowing how much effort it had taken to make all the various species. Creating Fraizha had probably been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. Not emotionally hard, he'd been through some very difficult times. But it had been exhausting.

His people had been busy down here too. At the foot of the mountain they had made piles of wood, stone objects, and various foods, ready to be ported to the storage rooms above. They were there working, and watched him as he went through the bushes and collected various shrubbery to soften his mattress. He ported back into his cave to place it there, then came right back.

There was nothing strange about him porting around, they all did it, and they assumed he had picked a cave somewhere far off like many of the others. Those who wanted their location to be known had placed a marker on the maps, but Harry wouldn't be doing so. He wanted his cave to remain a secret. He liked his location, right above their heads. He could watch over them without them even knowing it.

When he returned to the valley, he saw they had collected gifts for him.

"You're the Wild One," one of them answered. "You helped us escape. Aadon said you went back to negotiate for us, is that true?"

Harry nodded.

"Well I heard our families will be able to visit us because of that. So thank you. You've been busy working for us back on Origin, so I doubt you've had time to make any of these things for yourself. Am I right?"

Harry nodded, and they gave him a stack of soft furs, a stone bowl, and some thin stone slates. Harry ported them back to his cave.

He spent the remainder of the day finding food. They would have given him some of course, but he preferred to do it for himself. He found fruit on the trees, and did some hunting. While flying closely over the trees of a large, forested valley he kept remembering more and more of the time that had earned him the name 'Wild One'. Those few weeks he had spent in the Ayan Wilderness had passed much like this: soaring free over the trees. He would spot some sort of four legged beast dodging through the trees below, and swooped down like a bird of prey. Using the strength in his hands he grabbed it by the head and swiftly broke its neck.

He could probably have eaten it raw, since he literally had a fire inside that would cook it as he ate it. Harry found that distasteful, though he had no doubt that's what he did while he had been living wild in Aya's forests. Instead, he brought back his kill to roast over his fire.

By that night his hunger was sated, and he had made a nice little home for himself inside the cave. He enjoyed the solitude, the lack of danger or excitement. He just wanted to relax; sometimes his life was much too intense for his liking.

The next day he did much of the same, it was only in the evening as the sun began to set that he went back to visit Aeyris.

She had been sleeping on the ground, and her appearance was less than dignified. The cave had cleared out a lot; the others had apparently become bored of complaining to her. However, she wasn't alone, and she had a wide smile on her face. Sitting beside her at the fire was none other than Olen, cheerfully cooking for her. Harry

observed them for a while. Olen was delighted to have her undivided attention, and he seemed to have put her at ease.

As Harry approached, Olen saw him coming and got to his feet, nodding his head in respect. "The Wild One!" Olen said with awe. "You're back." Harry smiled at him, and nodded in return.

Aeyris watched their interaction carefully, noting Olen's open admiration. She was nearly unrecognizable as the haughty Queen who ruled the Pit. She looked like a wild child, someone who had been camping in the wilderness. Harry thought that perhaps, beyond her fear, perhaps this had been her only break from her responsibilities since becoming queen.

I didn't intend for this to be a vacation, Harry grumbled to himself, but had to admit that as a non-physical punishment, this had been pretty good. Three days of sleeping on the ground and living within a ten foot radius would be a piece of cake to him, but to a spoiled brat like her? And having to listen to the grievances of those she had wronged had to have made an impression.

Olen returned to his spot and Harry joined them. For a few minutes there didn't seem to be anything necessary to say, there was a quiet companionship between them.

"Have I made my point?" Harry finally asked her bluntly.

Aeyris hung her head. "I just want to go home. I'm tired of people staring at me accusingly all day long, and being assaulted by guilt. They all have this same look in their eyes." She looked up at him. "You have it too, you know. It's... pain. The only one here who doesn't it is Olen." She looked around the room. "I can't stand being in this little circle for one more minute!"

Harry cleared his throat pointedly. "I left you here three days... You kept me in your closet for three months. And Aadon was in the same room of the keep for eleven thousand years." That was one fact Harry had picked up from Aadon's random thoughts.

Aeyris stared at him in shock. "Eleven THOUSAND years?!"

Olen raised his eyebrows. "Wow!" His favorite word.

"So what have people been saying to you?" Harry asked her.

"Some of them yelled at me," Aeyris said wearily. "And some of them just talked. They told me how much they hated the Keep. How they were treated there," Aeyris told him. "Lots of them really hate me. They also told me about how much they love it here, and how wonderful it is."

"Are you still going to try to take that away from them?" Harry asked.  
"From Olen?"

Aeyris shook her head vehemently. "No!" She frowned at him. "A third of them also told me that they're not forsaken, that they have a god now... their own god, who created this planet for them. Is this true?"

Harry nodded seriously. "It is."

Aeyris bit her lip thoughtfully. "That's good," she said finally. "Someone needs to look after this bunch." She winked at Olen.

"I met him!" Olen said proudly.

"You did?" Aeyris said, seemingly unsure as to whether to take him seriously.

"He spoke to me in my dreams and gave a message for Aadon," Olen told her. "He warned me that you were looking for us, before you and the Wild One even showed up."

"Aadon is your leader," Aeyris confirmed.

Olen nodded. "Yes, he's great!"

"You must be pretty special to carry messages for them," Aeyris said, and Olen beamed.

"Well, I'm glad you learned your lesson Aeyris," Harry said.

"Why do I feel like you're reprimanding me like a child right now?" Aeyris asked.

"Because I am," Harry told her. She looked away, her pride getting the best of her. So there's some of the old Aeyris still in there.

"You look a lot better now that you've had time to recuperate," Aeyris noticed.

Harry nodded agreeably. His skin was looking healthier, almost back to its normal tone, but his experience as a statue wouldn't be one he would soon forget.

"Are you ready to go home?" Harry asked her. She nodded. "Where would you me to open a portal to? Your bedroom?"

"That would be perfect," she said. "But... how are you able to even do that?"

Harry shrugged. He had a reputation of being mysterious, one he planned to uphold. Some secrets are mine to keep safe.

They got to their feet. "Goodbye Olen. Hopefully we'll meet again," Aeyris said, and the young Fraizhan nodded eagerly.

Harry ported out of the cave, quickly traveling across the Void and opening a portal to the Queen's bedroom. He stepped back through to let her know he was finished, and she followed him, stepping instantaneously across worlds.

Aeyris breathed a sigh of relief and touched some of her things, gathering comfort from their familiarity.

"I want to go see Enna," Harry told her.

Aeyris looked at him sharply.

"What?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"Letting go of the portal guides without more fighting, and understanding their situation is one thing," Aeyris said. "And my daughter is another entirely. I must protect her at all costs, and so far things don't seem to have gone well between the two of you."

"Something I intend to fix as soon as possible," Harry told her. "I really care for her, and I will always protect her."

Aeyris merely stared at him, deep in thought. Harry shifted under her scrutiny. What is she thinking? Harry wondered. I wish I knew.

A small smile tugged at Aeyris' mouth. "We'll see," was all she said.

"What now?" Harry asked.

"You may see her," Aeyris said. "I'm not telling you not to. I'm just suggesting you wait. You went from being the biggest traitor of the realm to royal kidnapper, and perhaps I should tell them I'm alright before you go wandering around."

"What are you waiting for?" Harry wanted to know.

Queen Aeyris arched her brow sharply. "I'm not exactly going to return looking like this, am I?" She gestured to her unkempt state. Harry shrugged and sat down to wait. Surprisingly it didn't take long; Aeyris merely washed her face, combed her hair and pulled on a new dress.

"That was quick," he noted.

"I do enjoy my finery," Aeyris told him, "But I'm the practical sort, myself. I probably wouldn't go around so decked out if it was my idea. I have a dual role to play, Harry, I must be a figurehead as well as a ruler."

This was new to Harry. I suppose I really don't know her very well.

"Let's go face the music," Aeyris said. "I warn you, Natan and Iz are not going to be happy to see you. Nor the Aseeans."

Harry briefly considered letting her go explain on her own, but there was something unquestionably cowardly about that route. It would make a better impression if he was there, so that they knew he had brought her back on good will.

Harry nodded and was surprised when she reached out toward him. He offered her his arm, and she rested her fingers on it and glided beside him in a queenly fashion out the door.

Author's Note: This chapter was fairly uneventful, but the next chapter is going to be of vital importance! Lots of action, and we find out who is behind the Ice Lizards! Any guesses?

## Chapter Forty-Four: Truth and Sacrifice

The halls were empty. "Where would they be?" Harry asked.

Aeyris pursed her lips thoughtfully. "If I were gone... they would probably be with Enna. To make sure she's safe, they'd probably keep her with them. Follow me."

She guided him away from her bedroom and through the royal quarters, passing Enna's old room, until they had almost left the area entirely. On the floor beside the walls were the rows and rows of small enchanted stones carrying protection spells. Aeyris nodded to a small, unassuming door next to him on his left, and Harry pushed it open for them to step through. He recognized the room. This was where Enna was staying.

Enna was sitting on the edge of her bed on the far side of the room, Darling perched on her shoulder. Her eyes lit up as the door opened, she was the first to see them.

"Mother!" she said. "Harry!"

Also in the room were Iz and Natan, who had their backs to Enna as if they had forgotten she was there entirely. They had spread parchment and slates all over a desk and were standing face to face, conferring with each other, in deep concentration. They turned and gaped to see Harry and the Queen walk through the door as they were, her fingertips resting on his arm.

"Hello," Aeyris said, quite casually. "I'm back."

They stared.

"I sure hope you didn't tell the whole Pit I'd gone missing," Aeyris told them. "With this Ice Lizard threat on high alert, that would surely have been disastrous."

Natan shook his head. "We've kept it secret thus far. But Your Highness, you've been gone for three days!" Natan's gaze locked on

Harry. "I warned you when you first arrived here boy, that if you ever hurt —" he bellowed.

"Well I'm perfectly fine," Aeyris interrupted, "As you can see."

"He kidnapped you, Your Highness!" Natan said angrily. "We've been in complete panic since Enna and the Aseean reported your disappearance to us. It was an absolute nightmare!"

"Harry," Iz said, glaring. "This was the worst thing you could have possibly done. I tried to help you in the beginning, I tried to find you work and keep you out of the Keep, even when you attacked your own Hand and they wanted to lock you away, I spoke for you. And what do you do in return? Betray us all. First you run away, then you 'borrow' the Princess, then you take off with all the Cursed and now this!"

Harry felt hot as his temper flared, and he glared right back. "You never tried to help me," Harry accused. "You were just keeping me out of the Keep so that I would be of use to you!" He looked at both Aeyris and Iz. "Both of you were responsible for this." He showed them his arm, where the circular scars from his gates were still pale on his skin in a row down his inner forearm. "You shoved spikes of crystal into my flesh. That's sick!"

He was sure by their expressions that his eyes were glowing and flickering, but his control wasn't wavering.

Bravely, Aeyris laid a hand on his arm, covering some of the scars. "I'm very sorry," she said quietly. "Please calm down." She looked to the others. "Stop yelling, please," she said authoritatively. "Things have changed. We will no longer be attempting to recapture the Curs—the portal guides."

They glared at Harry. "What have you done to her?" Natan demanded. He was furious.

"I didn't do a thing," Harry retorted. They assume I've threatened her in some way, of course.

"He brought me to the portal guide planet," Aeyris said. "Let's just say it was an eye-opening experience for me. The portal guides will stay there. End of discussion."

Out of the shadows on his left stepped one of the Aseeans. There were two in the room, one on either side of Harry and Aeyris. The one next to Harry grabbed his wrist. It was the leader of the Aseeans, and his expression was calm and determined as he gazed at Harry.

"You will be punished for your crimes against the Queen and the empire," the Aseean said.

Harry jerked his arm away, only for it to be pulled back painfully. The Aseean had turned his hand into stone, fusing his fingers together and making his grip absolute. Harry ported away a few feet, hoping to port out of his grip, but since the Aseean stayed in contact with him, he was ported along.

"Let go!" Harry said. This isn't going as well as I'd hoped.

"You should have been one of us," the leader of the Aseeans told him. "As a Cursed and a mage, we are the most powerful. Those like us should devote their lives to the Queen. Instead, you have brought her difficulty and harm."

"What about all the times I rescued her daughter?" Harry demanded.  
"Let go!"

The Aseean let go, but Harry was furious to discover that he had simultaneously set another spell, one that turned Harry stone from the knees down and locked his feet to the floor.

"You're not going anywhere," the Aseean said grimly.

"Stop it!" Enna yelled. "What are you doing to him?"

"I didn't allow this," Aeyris said sternly. "Release him!"

Instead, the Aseean looked to Iz.

"You've just been through a traumatizing experience," Iz said gently. "Aeyris, we think you should rest. We can discuss this all when you're feeling like yourself again."

"I am myself!" Aeyris hissed. "Don't patronize me!"

"Stop!" Enna repeated urgently.

"Listen to me right now—" Aeyris repeated, but Enna continued, interrupting her.

"Help!" she yelled.

It occurred to Harry that she wasn't talking about his situation anymore. He looked over Iz and Natan's shoulders; something was happening in the back of the room. They all turned to look.

Darling, the bird, had hopped down from her shoulder, and was growing in size. Now the size of a terrier, the shape of the bird softened and for a few moments it was simply amorphous, until it grew larger and reformed into another creature entirely... a full size Ice Lizard.

"Let me go!" Harry repeated, loudly and urgently, but they were transfixed. The Aseeans finally leapt into action, lunging toward the princess.

A flash of blue next to them signified a portal opening to Harry, and the Ice Lizard immediately pushed Enna through it, following close behind.

"Enna!" Aeyris shrieked piercingly.

Two Ice Lizards came through the portal from the other direction, and it promptly closed. The Aseeans engaged the Ice Lizards, fighting them. Aeyris ran toward where the portal had been a moment earlier, but Natan grabbed her and pulled her back.

"You can't, Aeyris," he yelled. "Stay back! We can't lose you!"

"But Enna!" Aeyris said, and lurched to Harry. "Save her!"

Harry fought against the force holding him to the ground, and even tried to reverse the statue enchantment with his casting stone, but he didn't know the counter-spell.

"He stuck me to the floor!" Harry yelled back, panicked. Enna! The portal was closed now, and she was simply gone.

One of the Ice Lizards took an Aseean's head off, reducing him to rubble. The rubble quickly disappeared, disintegrating.

Now there was two Ice Lizards fighting the leader of the Aseeans, ferociously snapping and clawing at him.

"Forget them!" Harry yelled, trying to reach him through the Aseean's battle fury. "If they kill you, I'll be stuck! I have to go after Enna! You have to free me!"

"He's her only chance!" Aeyris screamed at the Aseean leader. Harry had never seen a look on her face like the one at that moment. It was yet another side of Aeyris he had never seen.

At first it seemed as if the Aseean wasn't going to listen. But finally he backed away, whirling around and grabbing Harry by the shoulder, touching his other hand to his rock-like casting stone. The spell holding his legs eased, and Harry stepped out of it, trying to shake the numbness from his calves.

"Take care of these two," Harry ordered, and then ran for the spot where the portal had been, dodging the duo of Ice Lizards on the way as they tried to keep him from it. He glanced back the moment before he ported.

Aeyris had her hands clasped against her chest, her face an expression of absolute horror. Natan was holding her, and Iz was gone, presumably to get reinforcements. The Aseean had begun fighting the Ice Lizards again.

Harry ported into the Void. The storm was blinding as usual, and Harry wished he could take a minute to get himself to glow so that the wind would abate but there was no time. He looked frantically around for any sign of the portal that had taken Enna.

For the first time, Harry saw all the threads of all the portals in their entirety. Combined, they made a blue spider web that connected the many planets... it must have been the original vision of the first gods, to be like this, when they had first created the portal guides. It was a beautiful sight.

They glowed blue-violet, and Harry realized that the color they had been all along was his blue, the distinct color he glowed when he was using his demigod powers. They were connected, Harry and his people.

Unfortunately, none of the portals was the one he was looking for.

What now? Harry wondered. If only we were still bonded... I supposed I could go to Sky's End and try to find her in The Eye. He didn't like at idea. He wanted to be at her side immediately. No! He decided. I am the god of the portal guides, and the portals are my element! If anyone can find where that one went, it would be me. It was one of my people who made that portal. I have to find him.

Harry flew around, eyes roving over all the planets in his view. Finally one of them caught his attention; there was a flicker of blue. Strangely, this planet was very small and isolated, there were no portals reaching to it from any of the other planets.

Deciding this planet warranted a try, Harry dove into it, picturing Enna.

The wind howled, for a second he wasn't sure whether he had left the Void. However, the temperature had dropped, from fatally freezing to just plain freezing cold. He was standing on frozen tundra, an endless flat plain of ice, where a windstorm was raging through the air. Enna was kneeling at his feet, shivering. Seeing him appear in front of her, she gasped with relief and he gathered her to himself.

"Harry!" Enna cried. She hugged him tightly. "Darling wasn't a bird at all, Harry!"

"I know." Harry looked around. "Where are we?" he asked.

"The Ice Lizard planet," Enna told him. Sure enough, on second glance, some white lumps scattered about appeared to be Ice Lizards. They pressed themselves to the ground, and the icy winds skipped over them.

Enna shivered, and Harry folded his black wings around the both of them until only her head was visible in the V of the fold of his wings. They stood in silence for a moment while she warmed up, pressing herself against him. Standing on her tip-toes, she tilted her face up and leaned forward until her lips were right next to his ear.

"She's watching us," Enna whispered cryptically. A chill ran down Harry's back.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Her," Enna said, sounding scared, and looked off at the tundra beside them. Harry and Enna stayed facing each other, standing sideways to where Enna had indicated, positioned defensively.

Harry looked carefully into the storm. Finally he saw her.

A tall woman stood watching them, nearly invisible against the ice. Everything about her was white, from her hair, to her robes, to her pale face, and even her eyes. They were white and empty, the opposite of Dark Eyes' black eyes, which had a certain depth. She gazed at them steadily. She shone, and even though the wind whipped through the air around her, not a single strand of her hair stirred. Her robe, which was long and fastened shut with many small bones, was still. She glowed.

Harry had never seen her before, yet he instantly knew who she was.

"Intuition," he acknowledged. "Goddess of Mystery."

She merely smiled.

Harry immediately wracked his brains for everything he knew about Intuition. She's the Goddess of Mystery, and of the Future. Her opposite is the Hermit God, God of Knowledge and History. Harry remembered his mother saying that only Intuition knew where people went after death... after all; it's life's greatest mystery. She was the only god not to make her own species... until now.

"What do you want with Enna?" Harry demanded.

Slowly Intuition walked towards them, through the storm yet apart from it. She stopped about eight paces away.

"Nothing," Intuition said simply. Her voice was like wind blowing through trees, soft and whispery and low.

Harry struggled to understand this. "That bird was with Enna for months. If you had wanted her, who could have kidnapped her at any time while I was gone. But you waited until I was in the room, but unable to stop you immediately." He frowned. "This was a trap for me, wasn't it?"

Intuition nodded. "You made it quite easy." On her shoulder was a small white bird, who peered at them curiously.

"Darling!" Enna said, recognizing her. "She was an Ice Lizard the whole time?"

"No," Intuition told her. "This was a real bird. Everything about it was real, even the affection it had for you. But inside, it had the potential for change." She reached up and the bird hopped onto her finger. Intuition brought the bird down before her. "This is a true shapeshifter. Another one of my little creations, one I made a very long time ago. It doesn't remember you anymore. When it changes shapes, it forgets everything."

The bird didn't seem perturbed by the wind either; it seemed sheltered within Intuition's glow.

"Why do you want me?" Harry asked her directly.

"You've been in my way for some time," Intuition told him. "And it's time for me to move my plans along. I'm going to need you out of the way. You and your little friend will be staying on the Ice Lizard Planet."

Harry frowned at her. What's her plan? She knows I can port... I don't like the sound of this. He reached between Enna and himself, touching his casting stone. He attempted to set up some defensive spells around them, including one to hold off the wind and the cold, but they didn't work.

"I've taken preventative measures against that," Intuition informed him. "You see Harry, this planet is very cold. Without you here, Enna will quickly die. Therefore you can't leave her. You can try to make a portal back to Origin, but if you leave, the Ice Lizards are ordered to kill her immediately. I think I know what you will decide."

Enna hid her face against his chest, and he tightened his wings around her protectively.

Harry understood. He could go back and warn the others who was behind the Ice Lizards, but if he did, Enna would die. As long as he stayed with her she would live, and that kept him conveniently unable to leave the planet. As hard as he thought, he couldn't find a way out of her trap.

"I was planning on just telling you this much and leaving now, but I owe a favor," Intuition continued.

"Who do you owe a favor?" Harry asked curiously.

"Boys!" She called, raising her voice. A figure ported on either side of her, each as dark as she was light, wearing black clothes that matched their ink black wings. On her right side stood none other than Etilon, former Leader of the Black Storm returned from the dead, and on her left was Harry's cousin Alexander. Harry wasn't sure who to stare at.

"Etilon has been loyal," Intuition said. "And he requested that I explain further before we depart this place."

Etilon looked smug. "I wanted to see the look on your face," he admitted. Alexander watched, emotionless. His face was a reflection of what was inside. In this case: absolutely nothing. He was entirely under Intuition's control. It was chilling to see this expression on a face so like Harry's own.

"When we were fighting, you had gone totally over the edge," Harry protested, "Which means you couldn't have ported away to safety. And you couldn't fly, so how did you survive your fall from Sky's End? That should have killed you."

Etilon glared at him. He obviously didn't appreciate his defeat mentioned. "Intuition didn't let me die. So your attempt to kill me and take my place failed."

"I wasn't trying to—" Harry said, but Etilon interrupted.

"Whatever." He looked at Enna. "Why are you still with him? You know he slept with the Goddess of Sex, right?" he said bitterly.

Enna didn't respond.

"Ignore him," Harry whispered. "Shut up!" he said loudly, angrily. "So then, since you've come to gloat, how do you fit into all this?"

"Intuition approached me a long time ago," Etilon said. "I was Leader of the Black Storm... but I wanted more. And she needed someone who could make portals for her Ice Lizards. When Intuition takes over, I'm going to have power unlike anything I've ever had before."

Harry furrowed his brow. Intuition wants to take over? Take over what? Origin, Sky's End? If she wants power, she can just make a new planet. She's one of the great original gods! Something else occurred to him. The other gods would never let her get away with all this... this doesn't match up.

"I worked for her a while, but then people began noticing my absence. I had responsibilities at Sky's End, I was right under their noses the whole time and I couldn't draw attention to myself. So we needed another portal guide... the Keep is very well protected, but there were three Cursed not in the Keep. I decided to take the most powerful of them... you."

Harry pulled up his memories of that night. He had been fast asleep, but had awoken when a portal had opened in his bedroom. Somebody had been standing at the foot of his bed, looking down on him in the darkness, and he'd never gotten a good look at them. "It was you."

"You fought back quite aggressively," Etilon said, seemingly mixed with both admiration and annoyance. "I tried to grab you while you were fighting the Ice Lizard, but you cut me. Fortunately there was another Cursed in the next room, so I went in there and grabbed him before he knew what was going on and while you were distracted."

"I had hoped Alexander would willingly cooperate," Intuition said wryly, "But he adamantly refused. He insisted on being difficult, so I had to take certain liberties with his willpower."

Harry knew this. He had been there, inside Alexander's mind, and knew what had been done there. "Is it permanent? Will he recover?"

"That is irrelevant, I should think," Intuition said, and inside Harry recoiled at her coldness.

Who is she really? What is she thinking? He wondered. Can she really be that heartless?

"That was before we knew who you really were," Etilon concluded.

"The other gods had to remain oblivious," Intuition said. "Dark Eyes has barriers around the Pit, barriers you are able to pierce but Etilon cannot, and I had to let him through to get to you and your cousin. Spells created by your grandparents acknowledge your heritage and let you slip through, but I had to force my way in. This was unfortunate, as Dark Eyes noticed they had been tampered with, and

this alerted him. He didn't know who did it, but he's been closely watching me all this time... I believe he's the only one who suspects."

"Grandfather isn't going to let you just get away with this," Harry insisted. That must be what Dark Eyes was doing when I first came to Sky's End; he was off trying to figure out what she was up to.

Surprising to Harry, Intuition laughed. Her laughter was filled with real mirth... she obviously knew something he didn't. "Your faith in him is inspiring. If I had to choose one, I would say that Dark Eyes is the most powerful of the gods, he's quite impressive. It's a shame he's so wrapped up in that vain, silly bitch."

"That would be my grandmother," Harry growled. "She's not a bitch. I thought you have the gift of sight to her people?"

"That was a long time ago," Intuition said. "I might have called her a friend, then... but all this is beside the point. Trust me, little god-ling, despite the prowess of Dark Eyes; he will not be getting in my way anytime soon." She raised a hand in farewell. "And neither will you. Come boys, I've had enough of this."

Etilon smirked at them, and Alexander just started blankly. And then Harry and Enna were alone. Enna pulled her head out of his embrace to lean back and stare into his face, eyes wide with alarm.

"She's evil!" Enna said. "I wonder what she's going to do?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know. And we're stuck here."

They stood in silence for a moment. Harry watched Enna's face; she seemed to be formulating her thoughts, working through everything she had heard.

Enna frowned. "Okay. Why did she want you out of the way so badly? And what was this about your grandfather? She called you god-ling, what did she mean by that?" Her voice quaked; the wind whistled up underneath Harry's wings and chilled her.

An idea occurred to him— Darling, the shapeshifter, had been protected by Intuition's glow. Perhaps he could shelter Enna within his own aura of power.

"Just a moment," Harry said, and closed his eyes. Enna waited patiently, watching curiously as he focused.

So far Harry had started glowing when he was riled up and fighting Etilon in Sky's End, where his powers had more accessible, and also in the Void when he had been creating Fraizha. I have to focus on my people or my power, I think. The first time it happened I was just fighting and drawing upon that power, and I didn't even realize really. The second time was more purposeful. Maybe... an idea occurred to him. I was also glowing when I was reaching out to Olen! Maybe I could do that again, and Aadon can open a portal to here so that I don't have to leave!

"I have an idea, I just have to concentrate," Harry murmured.

He tried to detach himself from his body and send his mind to Olen, but what had seemed so easy while in Aeyris' closet was somehow so much more difficult now. The more he tried, the less he felt he was making any progress. As a statue, Harry hadn't been able to move or feel anything. The room had been dark and silent, and there had been nothing to hold his attention there, so he had sunk into a meditative state. At the present moment many things vied for his attention: the storm, the urgency of the moment, but more than anything the feeling of Enna's body pressed up against his own. And he couldn't step away from her and leave her unsheltered. He continued to try unsuccessfully. I just don't have the training or self-discipline yet.

Enna let out a little hum of wonder, and Harry finally gave up and opened his eyes. He was beginning to glow faintly. That much I can do, he thought, and with a small amount of effort his glow increased until it lit up the storm around him. The wind faded, skipping around them.

Harry felt a thrill of satisfaction. We're beyond the reality of this place, just like Intuition was.

Enna's golden eyes were lit up with delight. "What is this?" she whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Enna..." Harry chose his words carefully. "When I got the sun-sickness, and I left for Sky's End, the home of the gods, I found out something very important about myself." She waited expectantly. "Dark Eyes is my grandfather."

Her eyes widened dramatically. "Dark Eyes? The Dark Eyes, of legends?

Harry nodded seriously. "Dark Eyes and MindRuin have a daughter. You know her very well actually... she's the Goddess of Love, and she's been watching over you. When she was younger she visited Earth as a mortal, and ironically enough ended up finding a Silent there and ended up living back in her father's place, among his people. She's my mother."

"Oh!" was all Enna seemed able to say.

Harry decided he might as well tell the story to its conclusion. "I was born in the Pit. Shortly after my birth, my mother saw Dark Eyes standing over my crib, and he told her that he was sorry. She knew then that I had been born Cursed, and they fled with me to Earth. You know the rest of the story... Voldemort's attack and growing up with my mother's supposed sister, and then Hogwarts. What really happened was that my father thought that Voldemort had killed my mother and me, not knowing the truth about us, and had faded. My mother saw he was gone and thought I was dead as well, and returned to Sky's End. I was mistakenly left behind, but my mother wanted me to grow up as normally as possible."

Enna stared directly ahead of herself, and touched her forehead against him. Harry let her be. A few minutes later she leaned back again, and smiled.

"I've always thought the world of you Harry," she said. "But... honestly. No wonder Lush wanted you so badly."

"It makes me a demigod," Harry told her. "I'm only a fraction as powerful as Intuition or any of the other main gods... but I've been killing the Ice Lizards and keeping them from kidnapping people, and have generally been getting in her way. Also, now that I know, I can tell the other gods. She clearly doesn't want them to find out." Harry shifted uneasily. "I have a bad feeling about all of this. She's so damn confident..."

"How do we get off this planet?" Enna asked. "This is the dumbest idea I've ever heard of... Ice Lizards! I thought lizards were cold-blooded, how do they survive?"

Harry shrugged. His mind was on other things. What is Intuition doing right now? What is she planning?

"Enna, whatever she's up to, it's not good," Harry said. "She has to be stopped."

"I agree," Enna said.

"I can't just wait here!" Harry cried, exasperated. "Everyone back on Origin could be in danger... Ron, Hermione, Gray, Ren, Sariah..."

A shadow of a doubt entered Enna's eyes. "You're not going to... leave me, are you?"

"Never," Harry promised.

"Maybe you don't have to play a role," Enna suggested. "Maybe this time, somebody else is supposed to be the hero, not you."

Harry considered this. Perhaps she's right. I've always felt like I had to immediately act... maybe it's somebody else's turn to save the day.

"But who?" Harry asked. "Nobody else even knows what's happening!" He waved at the planet surrounding them. "Besides! Look at all this! Say we actually do what she wants, and wait here. What then? Perhaps we can live off this planet for a little while. After all, the Ice Lizards do it. But we still don't get off. Nobody is coming for us Enna! Nobody knows where we are."

Enna sighed. "That's all true."

"What about everyone else? People could die because I sat here like a coward," Harry said, rapidly becoming depressed as an idea formed in his head.

Enna appeared out of words, and she just gazed out at the frozen bumps of Ice Lizards.

"Enna," Harry said, very softly. He reached out and cupped her pretty face in his hands. Their eyes met. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Enna said immediately, gazing at him serenely. "With my life."

Harry cringed at this response. "Maybe we could... just go."

"Go where?" she asked.

"... through the Void," he said very quietly.

Enna blinked. "Can you protect me from it? Like you are right now?"

"This is absolutely nothing next to the Void," Harry said. "And I've got you wrapped up at the moment. In the Void I have to use my wings to fly. I could shield you only a little."

"Harry... the Ice Lizards," she said. "The ones in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. You brought them into the Void for a few moments, and when you brought them back..."

Harry remembered. They had frozen solid, and shattered like glass.

"Something's not right," Harry said. "Intuition's story didn't add up. What's her motive, anyway? I don't trust her, and I'm worried that I don't do something, the people I care about back on Origin are going to pay for it."

Enna bit her lip. I love it when she bites her lip like that.

"You think staying here is futile," she summarized. "And I agree. You think that we need to get back to Origin as soon as possible. Only, there's a large chance I might not survive."

"I would never take that chance without your consent," Harry said. "Leaving you here is certain death, and if I take you with me you could survive... Healers like you are known for working miracles. But if you want to just stay...I will do that."

What are you doing? Harry said, absolutely despising himself. The Void is Death. Don't bring her in there!

Enna was silent for a long time. "Lots of people could die... Intuition has a whole army of Ice Lizards, and that Voldemort wizard. It all adds up to no good. But I want to live. Is that selfish?"

Harry shook his head mutely.

She stared determinedly into his face. "Let's do it."

In that moment, Harry knew why he loved her so much. And he hated himself for what he was about to do.

"If you don't make it," Harry said somberly. "I'm going to warn everyone, and do absolutely everything in my power to stop Intuition. Then I'll follow you." Living without Enna was one thing. Living knowing he had killed her was another thing entirely.

She looked at him sadly. "I don't know what to say. I want you to live... but thank you."

They stood, hesitating, delaying the moment.

"We need to just do it," Enna urged him, "Go. Now."

Harry wrapped his arms around her small form, picking her up and holding her tight. He unfolded his wings and ran a few steps, so that he would already have momentum when he entered the Void. "Take a deep breath," he warned her.

The crossing was a blur. He'd never carried anything in the Void before, but her body was so small and so close to his it was as if she was nothing but air. He moved as quickly as possible, but he couldn't help feeling like he was moving too slow.

Maybe it's all futile. Maybe she was dead the instant we entered the Void.

They appeared on Origin in the room where they had left it, but the room was empty now. Harry let go of his aura of power, and stopped glowing just before he ported into the Queen's Hall.

The Queen sat on the throne, flanked by Natan and Iz, and the room was crowded with people. They all drew back, and upon Harry's return Aeyris and the two others sprinted towards them.

"Healers!" Harry yelled. "We need Healers!" There were tears frozen to his cheeks. He couldn't think.

Harry was covered in a thin layer of ice that was flaking off as he moved. He risked a glance at Enna. She was blue. Her eyelids were closed, and she felt like a block of ice in his hands.

Aeyris looked at them in shock. "Did you... take her into the Void?!"

Harry nodded. "There was no other way. Please... save her."

"Healers!" Aeyris repeated, yelling frantically.

The Healers can do miracles, Harry reminded himself. They can bring people back from the brink of death.

"Why?" Aeyris asked faintly, eyes on her daughter.

"It was her sacrifice," Harry said. "She willingly went into the Void."

Aeyris looked at him with surprise.

"I'll be back," he promised.

"You're leaving?!" Aeyris demanded.

Harry didn't answer, but merely ported out. I have to stop whatever this is from happening. Otherwise Enna's sacrifice was in vain.

He appeared on the floating platform at Sky's End, ready to face what awaited him.

The silence within the round room of Sky's End was oddly anticlimactic after all the recent drama and tears, and Harry felt like everything was too still. He first tried Dark Eyes' door, but it wouldn't open for him. Harry frowned. He's not here.

He quickly hurried on. MindRuin's door wouldn't open either. Worried now, Harry went to find his mother. Her rooms let him in, and he searched them quickly.

Empty. She was nowhere to be found.

It was with lagging steps that Harry went back to the main room of doors. Where is everybody? And who do I try next?

To his surprise, the room was no longer empty. Lush stood in the center of it, looking dejectedly downward.

Harry stood in the doorway, and slowly her eyes wandered up to meet his. She didn't look surprised to see him. This wasn't the Lush he had first met; she was transformed by the sad expression on her face. She wore her simple, suggestive chain mail outfit, but in accordance with her mood it didn't glitter as it normally did. Despite everything, she was still stunning.

"Where is everyone?" Harry asked.

"Intuition," Lush said, but then her hand flew to her mouth in surprise. "Ah. So she got to you."

"What do you mean?" Harry said. "You know about this? What happened here?" He walked across the room to join her.

"Intuition is very clever," Lush told him. "She only did make one mistake, and it wasn't a very important one unfortunately. She misjudged me."

Harry waited for her to explain.

"She must have been watching all of us, because she knew about you and me. After you returned to Enna, and I restored Wrath's flame, I was very depressed. She came to me then. She said she knew how I must be feeling, and offered me revenge."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You've known she was up to something since then?"

Lush nodded. "I refused, of course. Maybe I should have pretended to go along with her, but the offer injured my pride and I wasn't very tactful..." a smile crossed her face, leaving Harry to wonder which choice words the fiery Lush had responded with. "She was trying to get me on her side, but once I turned her down, she forbade me from telling anyone. Naturally I would never listen to her but... she's one of the great gods. They are so incredibly powerful. You and I are born of them, so we are superior to all others, but we have only a small amount of what they are. If I tried to open my mouth, nothing would come out. I tried to tell you."

Harry nodded. "I remember." I should have followed her! I should have tried to understand what it is she was upset about!

"When I was able to tell you her name just now, I knew you must already know. All this time... if I had known she was up to something this big, I would have tried harder to tell someone," Lush said regretfully. "Maybe if I had stuttered enough in front of my father, he would have insisted I tell him. I don't know if that would have worked. My father doesn't have much patience, anyway."

"What do you mean, something this big?" Harry repeated. "Where is everyone?"

Her expression was hard. "They're gone. I'm the only one left."

Harry felt like the floor had dropped out from underneath him. He had depended on his grandfather to come to his rescue again; surely the all-powerful gods would be able to fix things!

Lush sighed. "You can't even begin to imagine how brilliant Intuition is. Her plan was practically flawless. She planted evidence... made it look like Wrath and Dark Eyes were plotting things on the side... breaking the rules. It was an easy suggestion to plant, after all the two of them are known for creating the biggest Mistake of the Gods ever made. Better yet, Intuition knew my father probably had been up to something, breaking rules as he usually does. Meaning that he heard about their suspicions, and when they went to confront them, he had already taken off. It made the two of them look incredibly guilty, of course. You should have seen it. I've never seen such chaos at Sky's End before."

"My grandfather suspected her," Harry explained. "She had to get him out of the way."

"That she did," Lush responded grimly.

Harry frowned. "So... where is he now?"

"Right here," she said simply, and looked down at the ground between them.

Below them was The Eye. And staring right back up at Harry was his grandfather.

The dark glass of The Eye had gone perfectly clear, and in it Harry was looking down upon the top of Dark Eye's head. Dark Eyes had his head tilted back, and could see them both just as well. His gaze met solemnly with Harry's. Harry kneeled, touching the glass, which was hard and cold.

"Where is he?" Harry asked. "Is he below The Eye? Or are we looking into a room where he's being held prisoner?"

Lush shook her red-gold curls. "Neither. He's inside the glass."

Harry didn't look up. "What?"

"The other gods, Aya, Intuition and The Hermit God mainly, decided to follow my father. He's too powerful to let run rogue. Mind Ruin seemed uneasy with all of this, but she went along with it. They shut Dark Eyes in here for safe keeping until they got back, and didn't really listen to anything he had to say. Intuition pulled all this off without making herself seem an important part of the process. Aya was in charge. For the Goddess of Peace, she can be a real bitch."

Harry remembered the first time he had met the nature goddess. She had practically bitten his head off. "She definitely has a thorny side," he agreed.

"I tried to warn them," Lush said. "But I couldn't. So they left. My father could be on any of the planets, but he'd most likely retreat into the Void, it's hard to find anyone out there. There are other places too, places only gods can go. With so much ground to cover, Aya ordered everyone to help so that they could find him quickly. I don't think they intend to be gone long, but gods lose track of time so very easily. They could be gone for a hundred years and not even notice or care. In the mean time, Origin is unprotected. I immediately slipped away and turned back, no doubt Intuition did the same. Until you showed up, it was just me and him."

Harry wanted to try to smash The Eye with his fist, but he knew it wouldn't help, as his grandfather was enchanted inside. Also, it was part of Sky's End, he didn't think he would be able to. This is so undignified... Dark Eyes deserves better than this. Harry realized how highly he thought of his grandfather. He's been kind to me, and he's helped me all along the way. He's proud of me, I know it.

"Only another one of the great gods could let him out," Lush explained.

Harry felt his hope draining away. "So then it's just us... and Intuition."

Author's Note: I hesitated to add Harry's vow to follow Enna into death if it was his fault. I thought people would assume that since

Harry's life is tied to hers that means they both automatically live. But I'm not one of those authors where the main characters always live in the end. Anything can happen. Maybe she will pull through, maybe they both die, or maybe she dies but something keeps him from following her.

It may be a little corny, but it seemed appropriate, like something Harry would do.

IF YOU ARE READING THIS, REVIEW! I was up until three in the morning writing this double chapter for you guys, and I'm not writing any more until I have lots of reviews, thanks.

## Chapter Forty-Five: The Darkness

Back in the Pit, Harry's friends had called a meeting. Ren, Gray, Vosenn, Jon, Sariah, Miren, Shetha, Thamn, Ron, Hermione and even Draco were lounged around a small room on various couches and chairs.

It had originally been a sparsely furnished living room that connected several guest rooms, but they had requested more seating to be brought in so everyone would fit. On the wall on the left was a door that led to the room where Shetha and Thamn were staying, and on the right was the door to the room that Miren had to himself. Ron and Hermione had similar arrangements down the hall, and Draco had been staying somewhere with Vosenn. Luckily everything they needed was on the floor directly above or below them, and stairways and back passages connected the floors. They stayed away from the main shaft of the Pit, which was insanely dangerous to anyone without wings.

They had come to think of themselves as 'Us', and everyone else as 'Them'. A bond had formed between them during their adventures, a link that was almost tangible. Shetha had even started calling them the 'Outcasts', as if it were a secret club.

Before they were thrust out on their own to defend themselves in hiding, many of them, Shetha and Thamn in particular, had believed that their adult guardians would protect them from anything and everything. The Silents had for the most part had complete faith in the system of the Pit and the Queen.

They now trusted each other completely, and believed that together they could manage anything on their own, without their parents and the adults in their lives. Their faith in the Queen and her system was gone completely after Harry nearly died of the Dowse overdose. For the most part they had been bored, spending their days together in the Pit waiting to hear some news of Harry or the Ice Lizards.

They had cheered when Harry had liberated the portal guides, but now their faces were grave as they wished desperately that things had stayed boring and uneventful.

"How is she?" Hermione asked Sariah, who had just joined them.

Sariah winced. "She was frozen solid, and she's thawing out now, but she hasn't responded yet. They think she's likely to have brain damage and remain in a coma. The Healers are still working on her."

"Poor Enna," Shetha said tearfully. Thamn took her hand and squeezed it.

Jon shook his head. "I can't believe Harry brought her into the Void. He knows what the Void does to non-portal guides."

Gray was frowning. "Yes. Something must have happened that convinced him it was the only way," he said speculatively. "He would only do that under extreme circumstances. I wonder what happened to them."

His question hung in the air as they all quietly contemplated it. There was an almost inaudible knock on the door. They weren't expecting anyone.

"Come in!" Ren called curiously, glancing at Gray, who raised his eyebrows as if to say 'I don't know either'.

The door opened. It was Aeyris, alone. She looked stressed. Her eyes were red, and her hair was unkempt.

"There you are, Ron, Hermione, Draco," she said. "When you weren't in your rooms I thought I might find you here." She gazed around the room, seemingly unfazed by the number of occupants.

Hermione was surprised; she had been under the impression Aeyris didn't even know her name. They waited expectantly to see what she had to say, but the Queen stared back, as if unsure where to start.

There was an open chair where Enna usually sat; Gray got to his feet and pulled it from the corner. "Have a seat," he offered.

Aeyris nodded gratefully and sat down. “I suppose it’s just as well that you’re all here to hear this,” she began. “I have news, though none from Harry. He said he would be back but hasn’t yet.”

“What did he say?” Gray asked. “When he brought Enna into your Hall?” None of the Outcasts had been there, but it was common knowledge that witnesses had seen Harry speak a few quick words to Aeyris before disappearing. No one had been close enough to overhear, and nobody had dared to intrude on the Queen’s grief long enough to ask about it.

“He told me there had been no other way.” Aeyris was biting the inside of her cheek. “He also said that Enna had willingly gone into the Void.”

There was an impressed silence.

“What happened to them?” Vosenn said. “What did they learn?”

“I have no idea,” Aeyris said. “It can’t be good. Furthermore, I sent messengers to the Chief-King, the Centaur Elders and the City Lords, and have received dire calls for help. Yesterday, the sun went out at midday, and hasn’t returned since. This alone put most of Origin into a state of panic, but in the darkness the Ice Lizards are attacking. Scouts went out with torches, and they believe there are whole armies of them out there in the darkness, as well as many men in dark cloaks. I wanted to ask the humans about something...” Aeyris pulled a piece of parchment from a pocket in her dress and consulted it. “There are... creatures... out there, that when they appear, everyone present is struck with fear and hopelessness to the point of being incapacitated. They look like tall beings in cloaks and—”

“They glide?” Hermione completed.

Aeyris nodded. “So then you do know them. Lord Marr, the Outland Lord, thought he’d heard of them before, but he couldn’t remember what they were called.”

“Dementors,” Draco supplied.

Gray nodded. "I've read about them."

"Have you faced any before?" Aeyris asked.

Ron and Hermione nodded. "We know a spell," Hermione said, "But we can't go up against a large number of them."

"It's the best we've got," Aeyris said. "I'll need you to come with me."

"Where to?" Ron asked, exchanging a glance with Hermione. They were surprised, thrilled, and sad to leave the others, all at the same time. Draco was frowning.

"The City," Aeyris told them. "It's going to be the headquarters for those fighting the Ice Lizards. I'm taking mages and fighters with me, but leaving a third of my forces here to guard the Pit. If you three can help us somehow you should come along."

"If Draco is going, I am too," Vosenn insisted.

"I'll come," Gray said.

"Me too," added Ren.

Aeyris considered this briefly. "Very well," she agreed.

"I have a question," Hermione said. "These men in black cloaks that you mentioned... have they attacked?"

Aeyris nodded. "They leave unexplainable corpses behind. It must be magic, strong magic."

"Did they leave a large glowing symbol in the air? A skull, with a snake coming out its mouth?"

Aeyris nodded again. "Yes, they did! Who are they?"

Hermione looked disgusted. "Death Eaters. It means Voldemort is here."

"Who?" Aeyris asked.

"We should leave immediately," Hermione said. "We'll explain on the way."

Harry stood face to face with Lush across the Eye at Sky's End, but it wasn't her face that he saw. A torrent of memories flashed before his eyes.

Harry remembered the panic of being attacked in bed, Alexander suddenly disappearing, the look on the faces of his family... our family. What it was like inside Alexander's ravaged mind... empty. Who was he? Will I ever know? Harry wondered. The images continued; Ice Lizards attacking Enna, and Ice Lizards attacking Shetha and he couldn't seem to stop thinking about:the determined look on Enna's face before submitting herself to the Void. Lastly, Dark Eyes staring up from unjust imprisonment.

Harry locked gazes with Lush, who looked back at him mournfully. "Are we done feeling sorry for ourselves yet?" Harry asked her.

Lush's expression hardened like flint, and she drew herself up into a proud stance, resembling the old Lush.

"Very done," she responded.

Without meaning to, Harry let a low growl escape. "Nobody hurts Enna and gets away by me."

"What has she done to Enna?" Lush asked curiously.

"Do you remember that little white bird of Ennas?" Harry asked, and Lush nodded. "It was a shapeshifter. It turned into an Ice Lizard and kidnapped Enna. Intuition sent it... she tried to trap me with Enna on the Ice Lizard planet. I had no choice but to return through the Void and take Enna with me."

Lush's expression was shocked. "She... died... right?"

There was a painfully empty silence.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know."

"What will we do now?" Lush asked bluntly.

Harry opened his eyes and looked at her, surprised that she seemed to be looking to him as the leader.

"What?" she said. "My father may be the God of War, but I'm not a warrior. You are."

Am I? Harry wondered, and then came to the conclusion, Yes, I suppose I am.

Harry gazed thoughtfully at Dark Eyes' dark blue door as if it would give him inspiration. He could have looked down at Dark Eyes himself of course, but Harry wasn't comfortable with that. It embarrassed him to see his grandfather in such a predicament.

"Unlike Aeyris and the Aseeans, Intuition should have no problem finding the Fraizhans," Harry said. "I should go to them, make sure they're alright, and warn them. You should go see if Intuition has moved on Origin during my absence."

"The Eye doesn't work right now," Lush told him.

"Then see into it personally," Harry said, and Lush nodded.

Harry left through the heavy stone door. The padlock opened for him and as always, the door opened to an undetermined location inside the Void. The door shut with a dull thud, and he was alone in the Void as if the entrance had never existed. Harry wondered if he would be able to find the way back, even without the door left open.

The journey to his planet seemed faster than usual, though it was probably because Harry was so preoccupied. His mind was in absolute turmoil, a mix of panic and most of all, anger.

He slipped into Fraizha without a destination in mind, intending on paying a visit to the one person there Harry considered a true friend.

Harry found himself standing on the grand plateau, where a gathering was taking place. This didn't surprise him, though this gathering appeared to be a bit larger than any he had seen so far. Harry didn't immediately see Aadon, but that's who he had been porting to, so the Fraizhan Leader had to be nearby somewhere.

Sure enough, Harry spotted Aadon directly in front of him. His back was to Harry; he was addressing the crowd.

"This breed of tiger appears to be harmless when left alone, but if approached or attacked, especially if they have their young nearby, they become particularly nasty..." Aadon said loudly.

Harry was about to step forward to get Aadon's attention, but something made him pause.

Besides his initial heroics, Harry had slipped by the Fraizhans' notice. They respected him, but as he never said much to them he was merely a mysterious character, one of many in a society full of powerful and tormented souls. They were aware of him but never paid close attention to his coming and goings, besides when he had brought the queen they barely cast him a second glance.

Now, one by one, their faces were turning to him. It reminded him of their first time meeting face to face like this. He and Aadon had stepped through the portal to find a crowd silently waiting and watching. They stood silently, faces stoic but gazes absolutely fixed upon him.

Let's see, Aadon thought. What else do I need to cover? Saber-tooth Tigers, Razor Piranhas, massive Cloudbhawks... I sure hope those aren't Harry's idea of jokes. I wonder what he was thinking when he made the goddamn things... What is everybody staring at?

Aadon stood in front of a large crowd of his people. He had been very pleased with the turnout of the meeting, and things had been going well until a certain point when he realized the faces of the crowd had suddenly changed. Something had caught their attention. They had fallen silent, and their eyes were wide and filled with wonder. At first

Aadon thought they might be looking at him, but then realized they were looking at something behind his back.

He turned around to see what it was. Harry, the young portal guide and secretly their god, had ported onto the grand plateau beside them. This was a Harry Aadon had never seen before. He was glowing, a bright blue-violet aura of power that covered every inch of his skin. His skin itself looked smooth as marble. Everything about him looked completely unreal, from his skin to his hair to his intense, piercing eyes, which were narrowed in anger. Aadon took an involuntary step back, knowing he would never want to be the subject of that anger.

I knew he was a god, Aadon told himself, trying to explain away the surprise that he was feeling. But those were just words, logic... I guess it never seemed real.

Aadon pulled himself together and walked closer until he was only a few paces away from Harry. He spoke quietly. "I did keep your secret, friend. But I'm afraid it's too late now."

Harry blinked, and then looked down at himself with a small amount of surprise, as if he had been too preoccupied to notice he was glowing. He seemed speechless for a moment. "I see," Harry said finally.

"You're unmistakably recognizable. Everyone will know," Aadon told him.

Harry sighed deeply. "It doesn't matter anymore," he said softly.

"How could that be?" Aadon asked immediately. Strange, he was always so adamant about no one knowing. He wouldn't even confirm my suspicions. Why doesn't it matter now?

Harry met his eyes. "What are rules, with nobody to enforce them?"

Aadon blinked. I don't know what he means by that, but it doesn't sound good.

Harry knelt briefly, placing the palm of his hand flat on the ground and glancing up at the Fraizhans while he did so. They followed his every move. The glow of his hand intensified, and suddenly the ground beneath him buckled up. Aadon took a quick step back.

The stone itself was pushing up underneath Harry in compliance to his will, raising him up into the air on a high platform so that he towered above the others. Their eyes widened with amazement as he manipulated the surface of the planet before their very eyes, announcing his identity and ownership of Fraizha itself.

"My People," he said loudly, "Terrible events have unfolded." His eyes flashed with anger again. "The Goddess Intuition has plotted against our world. The Great Gods have been distracted, and Intuition's Ice Lizards could be attacking Origin as we speak. She has a corrupt portal guide working for her named Etilon. You may remember the portal guide who disappeared from the Keep many months ago; his name was Alexander. Etilon kidnapped him for Intuition, and when he refused to work for her she obliterated his willpower and his mind. The same could happen to you if she gets her hands on you."

There were a few low growls from the crowd.

"I know Etilon," someone said. "That is, I knew him. He's dead. He caught the sun-sickness many years ago."

"To the Goddess Intuition, it didn't make a difference," Harry said. "I'm concerned Intuition will try to use you against the people of Origin."

"What can we do to help them?" Someone called loudly. "You said Intuition might attack Origin."

"You would fight for them?" Harry asked, trying to hide his surprise but not completely managing.

There were murmurs of assent. Aadon felt a fierce surge of pride.

"I thank you all. Please wait here on Fraizha, and be on your guard. If Etilon, Alexander or Intuition herself shows up, don't trust them. I'll send for you when you're needed." Harry decided, then turned to

Aadon, and added quietly, "Keep Olen with you."

Aadon nodded, and Harry ported away.

Aadon noticed something on the rock where Harry had been standing and leaned forward over the waist-high platform to get a better look. There was a perfect imprint of a hand, as if Harry had molded the solid rock like clay, leaving his mark in it.

Aadon looked up at the crowd, and they stared back, speechless.

Harry returned to the Void, feeling his face blush and hoping they hadn't seen it. Well if that wasn't embarrassingly dramatic enough... He sighed. Desperate times call for desperate measures. It was too late once they'd already seen me, and I don't have the time to do anything but impress them into listening. Speaking of desperate measures, now I need to find Lush. She's my only real help now.

The stormy Void was of no consequence, held outside of his glowing barrier. He arrived back at Origin within seconds and pictured Lush in clear detail as he entered its space.

He found himself standing on an empty mountain top. He looked around, wondering where the red-eyed goddess was, and suddenly felt a hand on his arm. He was momentarily disoriented.

Suddenly Lush was standing next to him. She quickly withdrew her hand from his arm, and smiled slightly. "There you are."

"What just happened?" he asked.

"Gods exist on a different plane of existence than mortals do. I just pulled you onto the god-like plane so that you could see me," she said. "Gods are invisible to mortals, unless they have a symbolic form. When mortals look at the moon, they don't see Serenity sitting on her sky-boat; they see the round orb that symbolizes her presence. That way we can move among the mortals without them seeing us. For them to see us we have to move onto their plane of existence, and even then they only see what we want them to see."

"I never had a problem with planes of existence before," Harry said curiously.

"Yes you did," Lush contradicted. "Since you're a mortal god, you're automatically on the mortal plane. The gods can all switch themselves from plane to plane, but Dark Eyes is the only one who bothers to move mortals around, in the case of the portal guide warriors he brought to Sky's End. They're invisible to mortals now, except in their symbolic form as the Black Storm. He taught my mother how to do it for when she called them, like she did to you. However he was still the only one who knew how to reverse the process and put you back. When he came back and released you, he must have used his power on you so that you automatically switch back and forth to the god's plane of existence back to the mortal one when you come and go from Sky's End. You just need to learn how to do it yourself."

"What about my mortal body?" Harry asked. "It's invisible right now?"

"Yes. Until you die, it's integrated with your god-self." She explained.

Harry was about to automatically thank her for the information, but decided the best manner to take with her would be brisk and businesslike.

"What did you find?" He asked directly.

"Nothing good," Lush said. "I did some eavesdropping back at the City. Things aren't going well here... the sun went out, obviously, when my mother left Sky's End. The gods knew this would happen, but they thought apprehending Wrath was of more importance. Origin would survive in darkness for a short period of time, as long as everything else was stable... which it's not. Since my aunt Serenity left as well, there's no moon and the stars have gone to sleep while she's gone. That means Origin is in total darkness. The Ice Lizards are attacking, as well as some nasty characters from your Earth world. Nobody has a clue what's going on. I did overhear that Queen Aeyris and her people would be on their way, so I came here to see how they're doing."

"Quick work," Harry said, impressed.

Lush shrugged. "It's all they talk about. I only needed to overhear one conversation between the City Lords and then come here." She looked over Harry's shoulder and pointed. "There they come."

Harry turned and watched as Silent after Silent came out of the darkness. The first group was comprised of warriors wearing full battle armor, and following them were other varied groups. There were Keep Guards clutching swords, countless former Hand members traveling in sets of four carrying potions and weapons, mages with bright shiny casting stones lighting the way, and many common Silents with determined expressions on their faces carrying supplies. Following them was another crowd in battle armor, arranged in a rough protective circle. In the middle of the circle was a massive object in a harness of ropes, carried by more than thirty Silents.

"It's a boat!" Harry murmured. "I wonder where they got that from."

The boat was slung in a net-like hammock of thick, knotted ropes. Thick strands branched out from the hull like the legs of a giant spider. At the end of each rope was a sturdy Silent with a rope knotted around their chest in a harness the shape of an 'x'. They moved with care, distanced apart so as not to get tangled in each other's strands.

The boat was shallow but long, and there was a row of people seated on its benches. As it approached, Harry recognized Aeyris seated imperiously at the prow, dressed in white. She was sitting backwards so that she could see the people seated behind her. Harry spotted his aunt Amanda, Ren, Draco, Ron and Hermione. Flying behind the boat were Lexian, Gray, Vosenn and Iz. More of the Queen's people followed; the boat was roughly in the middle of the entire flying procession.

"Wow," Harry said. "That's got to be most of the Queen's forces. I wonder who's guarding the Pit." Harry frowned. "Jon isn't here. He must be with Miren and the twins. Sariah would be by Enna's side if she's alive and too upset to travel if..." Harry let the sentence trail off. "Natan is back at the Pit, and I don't see Madalena."

"Aeyris knows what she's doing," Lush said. "I'm sure it's not unprotected."

"She's cleverer than I gave her credit for," Harry admitted. "A bit stubborn sometimes, though."

"She's talking to the others on the boat," Lush pointed out. "That's why she's sitting backwards."

Harry tried to determine where they were. "They're still in Everdark. They must have only just left the Pit."

"All of Origin is Everdark now," Lush said with a slight sarcastic edge to her voice. Harry glanced at her face; her expression was dark. "How quickly the gods abandoned their people to the darkness. Aya can be rash, as well as persuasive. It's too bad Intuition targeted your grandfather. Dark Eyes would have stood up to Aya, temper and all. With him out of the way, Intuition just planted the seeds and let Aya do all the work for her. Aya is going to be murderously furious when she finds out."

"What about MindRuin and the Hermit God?" Harry asked.

Lush rolled her eyes slightly. "Oh please. The Goddess of Prettyness and Shinyness and the God of Writing Things Down?"

"Hey, MindRuin is my grandmother," Harry protested.

Lush reined in the disdain, slightly. "What about them?"

"They're two of the original Great Gods! You're telling me MindRuin deserted Origin, just like that? She let them lock up Dark Eyes? Without protesting? And the Hermit God is the God of Knowledge; wouldn't he figure out what was going on?"

"MindRuin certainly wasn't happy when they shut her lover away in what is essentially a reflective surface," Lush admitted, "She was the last to go through the door to the Void. I looked back and saw her touch the glass before following. She didn't say much though... what

argument did she have, really? If Dark Eyes had told her his suspicions, she would have dropped some hints to the others, so he obviously didn't bother clueing her in. As for the Hermit God? He despises my father. He hates Wrath more than he hates Intuition. He's intelligent, but not un-prejudiced. The main gods voted; Wrath was gone and Dark Eyes shut away, so there were four votes left. The Green Lady, Intuition and the Hermit God voted to go after Wrath, so MindRuin went along with their decision. The rest of us didn't have any say. We other gods are either children of the first gods, or were created by them."

"You were able to slip away," Harry pointed out. "Why were you the only one to do so besides Intuition? If any of them disagreed, they could have just disobeyed."

Lush sighed. "The consequences of my desertion are beyond my imagining, no doubt. None of the others had a reason big enough to bring them back and risk Aya's anger."

"But when they come back, they'll know the truth," Harry said. "You can't possibly be blamed."

Lush arched an eyebrow at him. "Can I?" she asked pointedly. "You have a lot to learn about gods, Harry. If they notice what I've done, they'll assume I'm in league with my father. My mother isn't exactly well liked either. My parents being who they are, most gods don't trust me as far as they could throw one of their planets."

"Why did you do it, then?" Harry asked, curious now. "Why did you come back?"

"I should think that would be obvious," Lush said, not meeting his eyes.

Harry gnawed on his lip. "Me," he guessed.

"For the most part," she admitted. "Intuition had already admitted that she intended to do you harm, and she wasn't going to give up just because I refused to help. But that's not the only reason. If I can clear my father's name, I will. He's been good to me, if a bit distant. In

addition, Intuition has pissed me off. Never underestimate the will of an angry goddess, Harry.”

The last bit made Harry smile. “Back to the matter at hand,” he said, changing subjects. “They’re not moving very quickly.”

Harry blinked, and suddenly he and Lush were standing on the side of a different mountain, again ahead of the procession of Silents. Lush had transported them forward.

“It’s probably the boat,” Lush said with a grin. “Nobody ever accused a flying boat of being swift, Harry.”

“Well since we’re still in the mountains, they haven’t left the original Everdark. They have to cross the width of the Ayan Wilderness, the Centaur plains, and Bloodbeast Territory before getting to the City.” Another thought occurred to Harry, “They’re likely to be attacked on the way.”

“So do something about it,” Lush suggested.

Harry looked at her quizzically. “Do what, exactly?”

Lush gestured to the hundreds of Silents flying by. “Get them there faster.”

“Impossible,” Harry said. “A portal isn’t big enough for all of them to fit through.”

“You’re the God of the Portal Guides. It’s likely that puts you in charge of portals too.” Lush shrugged. “You can do whatever you want.”

“Hmm,” Harry mumbled, contemplating this new information. “I’ll try. Thanks.” He paused, realizing how comfortable he was getting around her and added awkwardly. “For the advice, that is.”

Lush grinned brightly at him. “I’m just making sure that someone’s broken more rules than I have by the time the main gods come back,” she joked.

"Don't worry," Harry said seriously. "It's no contest. I'm a mortal god who just told my people my identity. Demonstration and everything."

Lush looked impressed. "You're quite the rebel, aren't you? I must say, I approve."

Harry decided not to respond to this and ported to another mountain, this one far ahead of the traveling Silents. He flew up into the air, directly in their flight path, and paused. He'd never made a portal mid-air before. And his portals had always gone from one planet to another, not looping around to the same one. Will my thread stick when there's no ground? Only one way to find out.

Harry ported back into the Void. The beginning of a portal stretched behind him, a blue-violet line connecting him to the dark planet. He re-entered Origin, this time picturing himself beside the City. He found himself high in the air above the coastline, where he and Enna had splashed in the waves; the location of his strongest memory of the City. The Secret Grotto was invisible in the dark waters behind him, but he knew it was nearby.

Harry stepped back to examine his portal. The end hung in the sky, and the rest of it arched over the city and far into the distance like a thin rainbow. He tested it by riding the portal back. Sure enough he appeared back at the Everdark mountain ranges, and the Silents were much closer now. Harry grabbed the end of the portal.

"Grow," he whispered, imagining the thread inflating. He thrust gobs of power into it, power from his own aura. "You are mine, and I'm telling you to grow huge."

The thread that marked his portal thickened, expanding, growing brighter and bigger until it illuminated the entire area; to his eyes at least, and to any other portal guides. To the approaching Silents and their companions it would be invisible. Harry thought his own glow dimmed slightly as the portal grew, but the connection held. Harry spotted Lush watching nearby, and went to her side.

"Let's hope this works," Harry said quietly.

"We're about to find out," Lush said, watching the first Silents enter the portal. They disappeared. Harry expected the other Silents to react violently to this, but surprisingly they continued onward.

"I forced it so widely open that they can see through it from where they are," Harry realized. "And everything is just as dark on the other side, so they don't know the difference."

"Good thinking," Lush said with a nod.

"I didn't plan it," Harry murmured.

The boat and its protective circle neared the portal now. Harry nervously watched it approach. Will it fit? The suspense grew as the moments grew shorter until he would know. Then the boat and its spider-legs vanished, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Let's watch," Lush suggested. "There was plenty of room on that boat."

"Sure," Harry agreed.

Lush touched his shoulder lightly and suddenly they were standing on the boat. It dipped and bobbed around minimally, as much as it would if sitting on the surface of water. The boat's passengers were silent. Hermione was clutching Ron's hand tightly, her eyes avoiding the sky below, but the others looked with interest over the sides.

Harry waited for them to notice him, but then remembered that he was invisible. It was odd, being this close, and not telling them he was there.

"Well," Ren said. "This is a pretty stylish way to travel, I must say."

"It must be amazing to have wings," Draco commented. "It's got to be better than a broom."

"Are the ropes tight enough?" Hermione asked tensely.

"For the tenth time, they were double-checked, Hermione," Aeyris said, sounding slightly annoyed.

Gray picked up on this and caught up to the boat, landing lightly next to Hermione, "Would you like to hear some more legends of Origin?" he asked, obviously trying to distract her. "Did you know there's one about a flying boat?"

"You haven't mentioned that," she said, interested.

"They say that the Goddess of Moon sits in a sky-boat, and to her the sky is like the surface of a calm lake as she drifts across it," Gray said. "There is debate about the stars—"

"Shh," Aeyris said suddenly. "Listen."

They were quiet.

"I could fall asleep here," Ren commented. "With the boat rocking and the sound of the—" Ren stopped abruptly. "Waves?!"

From below, the sound of waves washing against the shore was unmistakable.

A mage with a glowing casting stone came soaring from the front of the column, stopping just ahead of the boat, flying backwards. "Your Highness!" she called. "Lights ahead!"

Aeyris stood in the boat, which made Hermione look queasy. Turning, the queen peered ahead. Sure enough, the lights of fires through the windows of many buildings were flickering steadily, molding the shape of the bluffs on the shore.

Iz quickly caught up to the queen, navigating around ropes. "Aeyris," he said in a stunned voice. "I think we're approaching the City. From the other direction."

"I thought you said takes a day to reach the City?" Ron asked. "We left, what, two hours ago?"

"It does," Aeyris said in a weak voice. "It does take a day. Even if we had portal guides, porting an army of this number would take many portal guides and still be very strenuous. And even if we have, miraculously, traveled a day's distance in two hours, we're approaching from the ocean side. That's the opposite side!"

"That would take... god-like intervention!" Gray exclaimed, somewhat sarcastically, but then looked thoughtful. "It would, wouldn't it?"

"You think one of the gods helped us?" Hermione asked, excited. "That would be good news, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe," Aeyris said, and then added somewhat bitterly, "If anything, I would have thought the gods had deserted us."

"The gods didn't bring Enna into the Void," Iz pointed out gently. "Harry did."

Harry's cousins and best friends glared at the General's back. Ron opened his mouth to protest but Aeyris spoke first.

"And the sun? Harry didn't do that. It was the gods," Aeyris pointed out, and then added, "If Harry could do that to the sun my disagreements with him will be harder to resolve than I thought."

"Harry cares for Enna," Amanda reminded Aeyris. "You know he would never hurt her on purpose."

This was frustratingly uninformative for Harry, who wanted them to mention her condition, and not his involvement in her death or not-death.

"This isn't fun anymore," Harry said to Lush as the others continued the conversation, unaware of the powerful beings in their presence.

Lush shrugged. "We got them here safely. We can go."

"Let's take a closer look at this Ice Lizard army," Harry decided.

Invisible, the departure of the two gods from the flying boat went as unnoticed as their arrival.

Well, here we are, Aeyris thought as she stood, watching the City approach. Let's hope we're prepared for what's next. The sun went out; maybe the sky will fall too. Grotesque images entered her mind, in which the protection the gods had placed between Origin and the Void disappeared and the Void rushed in, freezing life on the planet just as it had frozen poor Enna.

"It doesn't matter how we got here. It's fortunate in any case," Gray was saying, behind Aeyris. "Who knows what was waiting for us between the Pit and the City. If they're attacking our allies, it stands to reason that they would try to prevent us from coming to their aide. We may not have passed over them without them noticing. Besides saving us time, we've avoided any anyone who would have attacked us on the way."

The City was close now, and small figures were visible in the glowing lamplights. As the Silent army passed overhead, the figures began to scurry around in panic like ants.

"General Iz, please take this huge, ungainly, unconventional army to the other side of the bluffs," Aeyris commanded. "Set up camp there. Carriers! I want a smooth landing. We are going to head for the street in front of the City Hall. Try not to squish any allies."

Hermione squeaked.

Iz flew far ahead of the boat to the warriors ahead, shouting orders. The Silent forces, including the protective circle, broke away from the boat and began to follow him. The boat and its carriers flew steadily toward the middle of the City. Vosenn and Harry's uncle Lexian followed. As the City grew larger, the figures in the streets calmed down, apparently have recognized the people overhead as friends. The City Hall came into view, and as the boat began its descent, the street cleared as everyone moved out of the way. Their faces were turned upward in amazement as they stood in rows on the sidewalks.

"Ron, Hermione, Draco, Ren," Gray said quickly as the ground flew up to meet them, "Cushioning charms on three. One... two..." the humans whipped out their wands, and Gray and Ren touched a hand to their chest where their casting stones lay. "Three!" There was a quick incantation from the wand holders.

The boat dropped the last few feet straight down, landing with a dull thump like a giant fist hitting a giant pillow. It continued to slide across the stone tiles for some ways while the Carriers came to a stop, nearly bumping into each other as they landed smoothly on both sides of the boat.

"Thank you for your excellent work," Aeyris said briskly. "Find General Iz and join the others. Tell him to join me once our forces are settled."

The Carriers undid their harnesses, bowed quickly to the queen, and left into the sky, disappearing behind the tall buildings. The heavy boat lay still, right in the center of the street. Vosenn and Lexian stayed where they had landed right behind it.

Amanda was the first to jump out. "Father!" she called. Sure enough all three City Lords were heading down the front stairs of the City Hall. Marr was looking old, frail, and worried, Duran looked tough and determined, and Alexander Laike looked completely thrilled. He caught his daughter in a big hug.

"What are you doing here?" Lord Laike asked, glancing over to the boat where she had disembarked, spotting Ren and the three humans among the Silents. "What's going on? Why are you and Ren arriving on a boat carried by Silents, in the company of Queen Aeyris?"

"The children were coming here, I couldn't let them go alone," Amanda said, and took a deep breath. "I have something to confess. When I ran away, I never went back to Mother's farm. I haven't spoken with her since the day you and I left together. She thinks I've been with you all this time. And also... my children, even Ren whom you've met, aren't entirely human."

Lord Laike stared incredulously at Ren, who climbed out of the boat. "Hello Grandfather!" she called brightly.

"Not entirely human?" he repeated slowly.

"I wasn't terribly good at running away," Amanda explained. "That's your fault, I suspect; I was a bit spoiled and didn't think living on my own would be quite so hard. I was nearly eaten by Bloodbeasts, but I was rescued by a Silent. I married him, and I've been living in Everdark. I would like to meet my husband, Lexian."

Lexian moved from behind the boat, nervously folding his dark grayish-brown wings tightly to his back. He offered his father-in-law a hand to shake in greeting, his face serious and unreadable.

Lord Laike stared at him, frozen.

"Father!" Amanda admonished, somewhat horrified.

"Ah, yes..." Laike said finally, coming out of his stupor. He took the hand and shook it. "You... saved my daughter's life, then. I thank you."

"No thanks needed," Lexian said quietly. "She's worth the risk and the effort, even against twice as many Bloodbeasts."

They faced at each other awkwardly, Laike eyeing the Silent's wings.

"There's someone else," Amanda said. "Now that you know the truth, you can meet Gray."

Gray approached his family, and smiled at his grandfather. "We've met. I was at the first Ice Lizard meeting with Queen Aeyris."

Laike took in the sight of his grandson, complete with wings of his signature mottled gray, and immediately pulled him into a hug. "How wonderful to be introduced to you at last! This is why you never brought them to visit me, Amanda? Did you think I wouldn't accept them? All those years I thought you were still angry."

Amanda just shrugged. "I wasn't sure how to bring it up... and there's nothing for me to be angry about. Everything turned out fine."

"Until the day the world ended," Aeyris added brusquely, "Which could very well be tomorrow, for all we know. This is touching, but we have important matters to attend to."

"Of course," Lord Laike said, and quickly gave Ren a hug. "It's wonderful to see you again, child." He looked at her carefully, noting she still didn't have wings.

"Since my brothers and I are half Silent," she explained, "They ended up with wings, but I didn't. It's unpredictable that way."

"And where's your cousin Harry?" he asked, "And my third grandson I heard of, Alexander?"

"You're in for another shock," Amanda said quickly.

"Remember the Ice Lizard meeting?" Gray said. "The one with the black wings was Harry."

"You didn't recognize him when we came to your house," Amanda said. "Alexander was like him. Cursed, a portal guide, whatever you want to call it. Harry is probably with the other Cursed, they all ran away and we don't know where they are now. Alexander was abducted by Ice Lizards over half a year ago."

"I did mention him," Aeyris pointed out.

"You didn't say that the subject abducted was my grandson!" Laike protested.

"I didn't know it, then. In fact this whole matter of you and the Raschadin family was kept secret from me until just this evening when Amanda requested to accompany us," Aeyris retorted, narrowing her eyes at the family as a whole. "I can guess why."

Ren grinned. "We hid Harry at your house after he ran away," she explained to her grandfather. "You helped the Most Wanted of all Silents to escape from the empire."

She is impertinent, that one, Aeyris thought, remembering how she had laughed when Harry freed the Cursed. I'll be keeping an eye on her.

Lord Laike glanced nervously at the Silent Queen. "I was unaware of this."

"It's all in the past now," Aeyris said dismissively. "Now, what is the plan?"

"You've arrived earlier than anticipated," Lord Duran commented. "We were waiting on your presence before calling a meeting. We can have it right away." His eyes darted over the queens companions. "Bring anyone you deem necessary."

## Chapter Forty-Six: It Begins

The meeting rooms in the City Hall were too small for the great number of attendants anticipated, so they ended up clearing out the big entry hall of all furniture, and moving in two long tables, pushing them together in a large square. City Hall employees came and went with stacks of chairs, setting them up as quickly as possible.

Aeyris stood with the humans, the members of the Raschadin family, and the red-winged Silent, Vosenn, watching the mer-people as they were brought in.

There were three large glass tanks filled with saltwater, each holding a mermaid, which were rolled in on tiny wheels. The first tank held an ancient mer-priestess, with skin with colors like metal that had aged underwater. Her hair was bluish gray, and her eyes were blank white, marking her with the Sight. The second tank held a mer-woman of middle age with dark blue hair and a long, silvery-blue tail. In one hand she held a long vicious looking spear, and in the other she held a simple conch shell. The third tank held a pretty young mermaid with long, mossy green hair and dimples; she too held a conch shell. Aeyris had never seen a mer-person completely out of the water before. Their tails were long, and they had visible gills behind their ears and scaly ridges on their arms. None of the mer-people spoke as their tanks were rolled in, but the mer-priestess nodded her head to Aeyris, who recalled they had met once before.

There was the sound of clattering hooves outside, nearing, and someone outside loudly exclaimed, “What is that?”

Gray wandered over to the open door and peered out curiously. When he turned around, there was a big grin on his face. “Guys, you’ve got to see this,” he said, sounding amused as he looked pointedly at his sister, Vosenn and the humans where they stood standing together. They quickly went to the door to look. Aeyris couldn’t help herself; she leaned forward to peek out the door.

There was some kind of huge, hairy beast, three times the length of a centaur and half again taller. It had short stubby horns and cropped shaggy fur. A young Bloodbeast rode astride on its back, casually

steering with a fistful of fur. Seated behind him was a Vineadryad with flowering vines on her head and the green eyes that marked her as gifted with nature magic. Aeyris recognized the Vineadryad immediately; she'd met the Spring-Bringer once before. As the beast slowed to a stop, Ren waved from the doorway.

"It's the Wanderer!" she said. "Hi Bumbles!"

Bumbles? Aeyris thought curiously.

"How did you get here?" Gray asked. "We left you on the other side of the world!"

"It was a joint effort," the Bloodbeast said cheerfully. "After you left, the Spring-Bringer told me she was heading back this way, and I decided to join her. We lashed together a raft, which miraculously held Bumbles. The current took us... upriver, downriver, across, whichever way we needed to go, thanks to the Spring-Bringer. We switched rivers now and then; Bumbles would drag the raft while we would ride. Fastest way I've ever traveled."

He jumped off the creature's back and petted it on the head. The Spring-Bringer slid off, exchanging greetings with those in the doorway.

"When we got close, we started encountering all kinds of strange things," the Bloodbeast continued. "There are big white lizards everywhere. We just kind of ran them over... Bumbles kept tripping over them left and right." He laughed. Sure enough, the creature—Bumbles—had silvery Ice Lizard blood all over its hooves. "When we got to the City, we nearly got attacked by Centaurs with big spears, but when they recognized Spring they started bowing and led us through. I didn't know you'd be here, I thought you were going home?"

"We just got here ourselves," Ren explained, and pointed at the boat. The Wanderer eyed the boat sitting on the dry street with curiosity, but didn't ask. "Why did you come?" Ren asked.

The Wanderer shrugged. “Spring thought I’d be of use, since I’ve done some much traveling. She says I could probably draw up some accurate maps, so I might be needed.”

“You crossed the planet on a raft with a buffalo to draw maps?” Gray asked incredulously. “That’s not wandering anymore.”

“His help, and that of the Sanaan Buffalo, helped me get here much faster than I would have otherwise,” the Spring-Bringer said calmly. “I am grateful.”

The Bloodbeast nodded his head at her with a smile, and as he entered the room was surrounded by Ren, Gray, Vosenn, Ron, Hermione, and Draco.

“We’ve been at the Pit in Everdark, hiding out,” Ren said, “Crazy things have happened since then...” she quickly began telling him, about Harry’s near death (again), their imitation of the legendary sky-boat, and her family’s reunion (or rather, first union).

The Spring-Bringer acknowledged Aeyris with a ten-fingered, two handed wave from the arms on her right side. She then sat down at one side of the table, all four hands folded in front of her.

A few minutes later, Unea strode into the room from somewhere else in the City Hall. “Spring-Bringer!” she cried happily. “I was so relieved when I heard you were here.” The two Vineadryads hugged, but just then heavy footsteps thudded up the stairs outside and the Bloodbeast Chief-King entered the room, filling the doorway entirely. Unea stiffened, and gave the Chief-King an indecipherable look.

She must have heard about Xaxx’s betrayal, Aeyris thought. If anything can be said to sum up Unea’s personality it would be ‘devoted mother’. She must blame him partially that her twins were in danger.

“Greetings, Chief-King,” Aeyris said. The Chief-King had two male Bloodbeasts and one female accompanying him, but Aeyris didn’t recognize them. “And Unea as well— your children send their love. I have them safely hidden away and well guarded.”

Unea nodded and quickly sat down. A fleeting, lonely look crossed her face. She must be missing her twins terribly. She hides it well.

Loud voices and the sound of many footsteps could be heard getting closer outside the door; a crowd was approaching quickly. Moments later, the doorway was filled as the rest of the meeting's participants entered and arranged themselves around the large, patchwork table.

Aeyris stood in the center of one side of the table, with General Iz at her side. The rest of her party, Amanda, Lexian, Gray, Ren, and Vosenn, as well as the three humans Draco, Ron, and Hermione stood on either side of her. The Wanderer joined them, standing next to Ren. The humans took nearby chairs. The mermaid tanks were placed in a row on the nearby edge of table to Aeyris' right. The Chief-King and his three Bloodbeast companions stood on the other side of the tanks. To Aeyris' surprise, it was the female Bloodbeast that stood authoritatively at her Chief-King's right side.

The Centaurs that had just trotted through the wide doorway purposefully took the side of the table directly across from the Bloodbeasts, on Aeyris' right side. It appeared the entire council of Elders had come, all seven, along with their General, the younger Centaur Eniladas. With their large horse bodies, they took up the entire side of the table, even standing shoulder to shoulder. At the far end of the line of Elders stood Enilor, the oldest, and beside him, on the corner of the far side of the table was the Spring-Bringer, who touched a hand to his shoulder in greeting, Enilor nodded reverently in return. The Spring-Bringers of the past and the Centaur Elders had a long standing, close knit alliance. Unea stood unassumingly by the powerful Vineadryads side, together representing the Vineadryad race. The Spring-Bringer had the authority for the race as a whole, and Unea, as the mother of the young, future Spring-Bringer, stood in for her daughter.

Also on the far side of the table stood the high status City humans, the very same Aeyris had met at their private meeting months earlier, when the ice lizards had first been identified as a threat. Philip the Historian was dusty and distracted looking as ever; Lord Duran's wife Rosabel looked cowed into silence by today's company, and it

appeared as if she had worn considerably more ruffles in an attempt to boost her confidence. Her husband the City Lord stood at her side, with the wheezy Lord Marr and a preoccupied looking Alexander Laike. Lord Laike had looked unsure where to stand; initially he had gravitated towards his newly found family members, but had joined his fellow human Lords in a show of solidarity.

The edges of the room were crowded with spectators, lower ranking City humans for the most part.

There was a quick round of introductions. As a Queen herself, Aeyris had met most of the important figures from the other races, but several were new to her. The eldest Mer was Luminae (whom Aeyris had met with before, but who's name she had forgotten), a High Mer-Priestess that was speaking for her people. The one with the spear was Elaide, a warrior mer-woman. The youngest mermaid was named Nyra; the purpose of her presence wasn't explained.

The two male Bloodbeasts the Chief-King had brought with him were two of his War-Chiefs, and the woman was his sister, Qezae. As he introduced her the Chief-King said, "On another note, I would like to announce that I have formally disowned my son Xaxx. Since I have no more sons to be Chief-Prince myself, my heir is now Qezae's young son."

This explained Qezae's presence sufficiently for Aeyris; unlike other practical races, that base authority on age or power, it's rare for a female Bloodbeast to have so much status. In their case it has something to do with Wrath's own prejudices, I've heard say.

The Chief-King eyed The Wanderer curiously, clearly annoyed that he didn't know the identity of the Bloodbeast important enough to be included at the meeting, standing among Aeyris' people. Aeyris let him wonder; when it was her turn to make introductions, she simply presented him as 'The Wanderer' and gave no justification for his presence. Mostly this was because Aeyris had no idea who he was herself. Not that she would ever admit it.

"To summarize recent events," Lord Duran began, "The Ice Lizards, of unknown origin and making, have been appearing briefly but

repeatedly on Origin over recent months. They targeted the children of the major powers of each race, except humans, and those children were hidden. They were found by the enemy, but managed to escape again and are now in protective custody. The Ice Lizards disappeared around the same time, and weren't seen again until just over twenty four hours ago. The sun went out, and Ice Lizards appeared in large numbers."

"Simultaneously as the sun went out," Aeyris added. "My daughter was abducted. She was rescued and returned to me shortly thereafter, but she may not survive the encounter."

This was news, and Aeyris received her share of pitying, sorrowful glances. They knew Enna was her only heir, and those who had met the young princess were fond of her. Aeyris couldn't even dredge up enough pride to be annoyed by their pity. She was just too sad. Enna... what I would give to go back and treat her better.

Aeyris blinked. Until this moment, she had never thought twice of her treatment of her daughter. She had, after all, tried to include Enna in her life many times. But did I ever try to include myself in hers?

"I am sorry for your circumstances, Queen Aeyris," Lord Duran said. "We hope the gods grant her life." There was a moment of silence as others nodded. "We have no way of numbering the enemies out there in the darkness. There are human wizards from earth and Dementors." Lord Duran mispronounced 'Dementors' slightly, as he was unused to the word, but it was unlikely anyone noticed, other than the Earth humans and Aeyris, who had heard much about the Dementors on their boat flight.

"I can send out scouts by air," General Iz said. "Of all the races, Silents have the best night vision."

"Naturally," the Spring-Bringer said with a smile, "As well as the best viewing perspective."

"We have been unable to contact anyone, of any of the races, outside God's Landing," Lord Laike added. "We must leave them to their own

defense, and keep the Ice Lizards and other enemies from attacking our own families.”

“Before we discuss these plans in detail,” Enilor, the old centaur interjected. “I have a question to ask of Luminae.” He nodded at the Mer-Priestess. “What does your goddess say about this unending darkness? Even the stars have gone out. Did you foresee this event?”

Luminae shook her head, long tendrils of hair echoing this movement in the water. “Our Goddess has been silent,” she said somewhat mournfully, but with dignity. “We have gathered all of our people who were nearby to the shore. The Ice Lizards have yet to enter our watery realm, but this attack on our planet will not go without consequence, and we will help however we can.”

The two other mermaids had been holding the conch shells by their ears, at this Elaide held hers up, free of the water and dripping above her tank. She garbled something in the water, something in the mer tongue, but her voice was echoed from the conch shell, translated.

So that’s what the shell is for, Aeyris thought appreciatively, that’s a neat bit of magic.

“My warrior Mer will keep your shore clear,” Elaide said, and shook her spear. “No one will swim in the waters or approach by boat. We will watch the skies and signal you if anyone approaches by air.”

“I brought three tribes,” the Chief-King said. “All of our men are warriors. We will fight these invaders!” He thumped the table with one large fist and growled ferociously.

“We brought all the Centaurs of God’s Landing,” Enilor added, not to be outdone. “We might not all be warriors, but we are great in number.”

“I have... many armies,” Aeyris said, not sure what to call her Cursed-bereft Hands, “And many of my mages.”

"We need to keep all the young ones and those who cannot fight in the City, and keep it surrounded and protected," Lord Duran stated. "There are a number of mages in the City, and humans without magic will arm themselves."

"I brought these humans," Aeyris interjected. "They have experience fighting both Dementors and the Earth wizards."

Hermione, Ron and Draco exchanged uncertain glances, clearly not very confident but not speaking up to say so.

They're all we've got, Aeyris thought. They'll have to manage.

"I am here alone," the Spring-Bringer said, "But I believe I can sneak back through enemy lines to my people. If the City is attacked, I can rally them and come up upon our enemies from behind."

"What would Vineadryads do against clawed monsters and magic?" The Chief-King asked, clearly skeptical.

The Spring-Bringer didn't take offense; instead she looked amused. "It's hard to fight mortal enemies when nature itself rises against you. Imagine if the trees grabbed you and tried to hold you down."

The Chief-King looked somewhat impressed. "We shall see."

"Or not," Aeyris added bitterly. In the absence of all light, even the Silent's formidable night vision was affected.

"Have faith, Aeyris," The Spring-Bringer said, serene as always.

"I don't—"Aeyris faltered mid sentence. Suddenly, she heard a male voice quite clearly in her head. 'Aeyris,' it said. 'This is one of the gods. Two of us are here. We're about to shift to the mortal plane of existence. Will you announce us, please?'

She stood quite still, struck mute with shock.

Gods?! She thought. You're hearing things, Aeyris.

'No. You're not imagining my voice.'

Everyone in the room noticed the flow of conversation stop, and peered at Aeyris uncertainly. Her body language was speaking volumes: she had tensed up, fingers squeezed into tight fists at her side, and her wings jerked involuntarily in surprise.

"Aeyris, are you all right?" Iz said quietly, grasping her by the elbow to get her attention.

Aeyris blinked at him. "Yes," she said finally. "I'm alright. I've just been contacted by one of the Gods. He said two of them are coming to the mortal plane of existence."

No one knew what to say to that. Out of the corner of her eye Aeyris saw something stir near the ground beside her and backed away quickly. Everyone on her side of the table followed her example, surprised by her sudden movement.

It was a curl of smoke. It rose from the ground, swirling up and thickening, taking shape. Next to it was a thin flash of blue-violet in the air, like a lightning strike, and suddenly those spaces were occupied by two glowing figures.

On the right side, the smoke had solidified into a young woman. She was painfully beautiful, almost too perfect to look at. Her skin was like smooth marble, and her features were too even. Muscles rippled interestingly under her smooth flesh, even as she merely shifted her weight. She was wearing two pieces of finely wrought golden armor held over her chest by delicate chains, and a wide belt from which hung a short curtain of chain mail, the golden links reflecting little flashes of light. Her hair seemed to move on its own, curling locks of hair that cascaded over her shoulders and floated around her head like rays coming off the sun, defying gravity. Each curl was a different color, from light gold to amber and a whole range of reds. Her eyes, roaming over the room's occupants, were the color of fresh blood. She was backlit by an aura of slowly moving flames.

The figure that appeared next to her where the lightning had stuck was more modest in appearance. The upper half of his face was cast

in shadow by the cowl of his cloak, the rest of which was draped over and concealing his body, but you could see it was a young male, taller than the goddess next to him. The skin you could see of his face and hands was just as unreal as that of his companion. What really jolted Aeyris was the flickering glowing light coming from where his eyes would be, under his hood... like an angry Cursed. From behind the god's back, pitch black wings arched from the top of his head to the floor. Every feather was shone with an almost mirror-bright reflection. He emitted a soft blue-violet glow.

Together, they were a perfect set, darkness and light, male and female. Neither of them seemed touched by the light in the room, it was like they were lit from within.

Aeyris instinctively shivered. She wanted to run from the room, yet at the same time she was mesmerized by their glow. No wonder the gods don't show themselves often, she thought with wonder.

The effect on the people room was dramatic. Some of them jumped, some of them froze, and several chairs fell over as their occupants carelessly got to their feet.

"Get a hold of yourselves," The Chief-King said gruffly.

"I know who you are," someone said surprisingly, next to Aeyris. The Queen looked; it was the red-winged Vosenn. Her eyes were wide, and she was gazing at the flame-colored goddess. "You're the Goddess of Desire," she stated.

The goddess nodded, a sly, satisfied smile curving her lips.

"How did you know that?" Aeyris demanded quietly, but Vosenn ignored the question as if she hadn't heard it, eyes still locked on the goddess.

"My name is Luscious," the goddess said. Her silky voice sent a chill down the queen's spine.

"Daughter of Wrath, God of War and Destruction and the Sun Goddess," said the Chief-King's sister. She bowed slightly, recognizing the child of her god.

"You are correct," Luscious confirmed. Her gaze drifted almost lazily over the occupants in the room.

"I am the God of the Portal Guides," said her companion, "Grandson of Dark Eyes and MindRuin." His voice was low and quiet.

The goddess cast him an affectionate glance. "Grandchild of one of the stranger couples... the God of Darkness and Goddess of Light."

The Portal Guide God ignored her comment.

"Do you have a name?" Aeyris asked, looking at him. This was who really had been behind the removal of the portal guides from the Keep, and she instinctively thought of him as an enemy, but it occurred to her that he was their god and therefore could probably do whatever he wanted.

"No," he said. "I'm a new god; I don't have god-name yet. Sometimes we keep our real names private."

"Why did you come?" Lord Duran asked.

"You have someone representing each of the races of Origin at this meeting," the blue glowing god said. "We came to represent the gods."

"You came for the meeting?" Lord Duran repeated incredulously, but a note of hope had entered his voice.

"To answer some questions," Luscious said. "As some of you may have suspected, the war you have on your hands isn't only a mortal problem. It involves the gods as well."

Aeyris sent an I-told-you-so look at General Iz. "The sun going out," she said immediately.

"Among other things," Luscious responded.

"What other things?" Aeyris asked. I'm not going to like this, I know it already.

The two gods looked at each other, hesitating.

"Basically everything," The Portal Guide God said regretfully. "The Ice Lizards, their sudden appearance and aggression, even the dark wizards."

"Who started it all?"

Luscious opened her mouth to respond, but no words came out. She frowned, touching her fingertips to her throat, and gave the Portal Guide God a meaningful glance. His reaction was hidden by his hood.

"Intuition," said the Portal Guide God, without supplying an explanation for what had happened to his companion. "Goddess of Mystery, and the Future."

"Why?" asked the Spring-Bringer, looking distressed. "Why would she do such a thing?"

The gods merely shook their heads. "We haven't the slightest clue," Luscious said, "Possibly some kind of revenge."

"We didn't foresee any of this," Luminae the mer-priestess said, almost sulkily.

"Intuition gave you your powers," the Portal Guide God pointed out. "It makes sense that she could block them." Addressing the room at large, he completed his explanation. "She created the Ice Lizards, most likely for the purpose of attacking you. She has some kind of connection with the dark wizards from Earth, and she has at least two portal guides working for her."

This struck Aeyris as odd. "Two?" she repeated. "There was only one abducted while under my rule." Her eyes narrowed with renewed suspicion. "It's Harry isn't it? He's been working for her all along. He

separated the empire from its greatest defenses at precisely the right time. I knew it!" Aeyris practically glowed with righteousness, she felt so victorious.

This got a strange reaction. The Portal Guide God twitched, and brought his hands up and folded them across his chest with a touch of anger, his first show of emotion. Luscious stared at Aeyris as if she'd grown a second head.

"Harry?" the god repeated, "No, of course not!"

"Well then you lost one yourself, because it wasn't me," Aeyris stated, crossing her arms back.

"With respect, my queen," Lexian asked quietly, "Are you arguing with a god?"

"First of all," The Portal Guide God said, his glow brightening with anger, "Stop talking about my people like they're weapons, or possessions. I thought you'd learned your lesson." Aeyris' eyes widened to hear mention of this. She didn't want it brought up—ever, and especially not in front of the people in the room. "And second of all, neither of us was responsible for the other portal guide. He went with her willingly, and she's a goddess, she didn't need to go to the Keep or my planet to find someone. She just took one that had already died."

"Is that common?" General Iz asked sarcastically. "Taking someone who's already died?"

"More than you'd think," The Portal Guide God said, seeming to calm down. "As a matter of fact..." He didn't complete the sentence. He looked over at the radiant goddess at his side. Again, something unsaid passed between them, and for a moment she looked worried.

"Wonderful, now there are dead people involved!" Unea said, sounding horrified, and perhaps a little hysterical, an expression echoed on the faces of several others in the room.

"I have a question," Aeyris interrupted, hoping Unea would calm down. It wasn't looking likely. "Was one of you the reason that we ended up flying over the ocean towards the City, when moments before we'd been nearing the edge of Everdark?"

The god smiled. "That would be me."

The room fell silent, and Aeyris suddenly felt humbled. Maybe I should be more tactful, if he's that powerful...

"You mentioned your planet," The Chief-King asked. "What planet is that?"

"Fraizha," said the God, "The Portal Guide planet. Aeyris, will you explain?"

Aeyris nodded, biting the inside of her cheek. She had avoided mentioning her loss of the Cursed, not wanting to appear less powerful. But if the god told her to, then she would. "There's a new planet, one cold enough to keep all the Cursed sane... and no longer Cursed, I suppose. They've all been relocated there."

"But how will portals be made?" Lord Duran asked, concerned.

"We will arrange something," The god said confidently.

Just then, somebody landed on the front step, coming from mid-flight to a stumbling stop on tawny brown wings. It was one of Iz's people, out of breath. "They're advancing!" The Silent said urgently. "The Ice Lizards, they're attack—" He then caught sight of the gods, and his jaw dropped.

"We have no more time to plan," The Chief-King bellowed. "Let's move!"

"We'll be close by," said the portal guide god softly, and the two deities faded away.

Things moved quickly after that.

Harry and Lush watched the mortals from above, invisible on the roofs of the City. They both had the ability to travel around instantaneously, but now Harry took over. He kept the fingers of one hand lightly on her elbow, so that they would move together.

The Silent had been right; a large amount of Ice Lizards was approaching along the main road, headed for the City. Luckily there were few ways into the City, unless one could fly over the cliffs.

The leaders at the meeting all returned to their people, and the mermaids were placed back into the sea. Centaurs, Bloodbeasts and Silents moved into defensive positions around the City; somewhere under the waves, the mer-people did the same.

"What do you think?" Lush asked.

"I think they have a good chance," Harry said. "Ice lizards and dark wizards are pretty tough, but with these numbers the city defenders must be evenly matched. The Silents and the Bloodbeasts will probably do the most damage. We'll see."

The city defenders split into two groups. The first group hugged the edges of the City, staying close. These were mostly humans and Centaurs. The second group, including the bulk of the Silents and Bloodbeasts, went out to meet the attacking Ice Lizards. The Bloodbeasts were led by the Chief-King himself, and Iz was in command of the Silents.

The first confrontation happened up beyond the bluffs. Along the path leading to the City was a small town called Godstep. Here the city defenders stopped to wait for the enemies to approach, and at that point everything fell into chaos. The darkness was overwhelming, and no matter how much light the mages summoned or how many fires were lit, it was never bright enough to truly see what was going on. The Ice Lizards were no more than silver flashes in the shadows. The Bloodbeasts fought ferociously, the Silent mages flung spells in all directions and the former Hands were still worked together in seamless teams. Armed with weapons and effective potions, they were formidable. However, the Ice Lizards were lethal, and even

though there were few dark wizards and Dementors interspersed between them, they were hidden behind short cloaking spells and dark clothing and struck invisibly.

Harry was reluctant for Luscious and himself to join the fighting; he feared it would draw Intuition's attention, and retribution. They watched anxiously for some time from the roofs of the town, but it wasn't long before Harry was shaking his head. "I was wrong," he said, gritting his teeth. "It's the darkness. They're fighting well, but they just can't keep track of the enemy. They would be more evenly matched if it weren't for that."

Ahead of them, three former Hands were fighting in the same village square together, back to back. They were barely able to defend themselves, let alone kill any of the Ice Lizards attacking them. Then a Dementor swept into the square, and the Silents faltered. The Dementors didn't seem to affect the other races quite the same way or as strongly as they did humans, but it gave them pause, opening them to the Ice Lizards, who struck without mercy.

Harry leapt down into the square, and shot a small bolt of pure power at the Dementor. There was a crackle of blue lightning, and the Dementor was swept away, disintegrating.

A split second later Luscious was by his side. She conjured a handful of Wrath's flame and threw it at several Ice Lizards, multiplying it. The Ice Lizards reacted badly, their skin burning and cracking and moments later they were a pile of charred bones.

"Nice," Harry complimented her. "Now that we've gotten directly involved, how soon do you think Intuition will make a move against us? Do you think she'll show up herself?"

"It's possible," Lush said mildly, sending out another handful of flame.

"Let's split up, and help as much as we can," Harry said. "Stay visible; it will give them some hope."

They moved to the mortal plane, and the fighters in the clearing gasped. A moment later, Harry ported away.

Over the next hour or so, Harry darted around Godstep, rescuing everyone who was getting overwhelmed and close to defeat. His appearance gave the fighters heart, and they fought with new energy. Everyone now and then Harry saw flashes of bright flame elsewhere in the City, where Lush was doing the same. Harry's bolts of blue power and his own store of Wrath's flame seemed limitless. He kept an eye out for Intuition at all times.

At one point, Harry spotted the Chief-King moving through the darkness outside of the town gate. Harry soared down and landed directly in front of him. The Chief-King stopped and nodded respectfully, out of breath. He seemed unsurprised to see Harry; the Chief-King was the kind of man who took things in stride.

"How's the fighting going?" Harry asked.

The Chief-King shook his head. "Not good. We can't see what we're going out here. In this kind of darkness, torches and glowing rocks just aren't enough. The Ice Lizards don't seem to have a problem with the dark; in addition, we're outnumbered."

Harry sighed. "Keep it up. We're doing the best we can."

Harry ported back to the town to look for Lush. He wanted to discuss with her ideas of how to bring the portal guides into the fight, but keep them from attacking the wrong people. Landing on one of the taller buildings, he scanned the streets for her signature flaming glow. He didn't see it. It occurred to him that it had been a while since he'd last seen her in the distance. He flew off the roof and began to circle above the town.

"Lush!" he yelled. She didn't answer, and Harry frowned. Where did she go?

He landed and closed his eyes, picturing Lush's face in his mind, and willing himself to port to her. But when he opened his eyes, he stood in the same spot, on an empty street.

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. This isn't right...

He tried again to port himself to where Lush was, and again it didn't work. This is ridiculous. I'm the God of Portals; I should be able to port myself anywhere. Why would I not be able to find her? What's happened to her? Harry ported himself to the Void and hovered over the dark planet of Origin with a few easy flaps of his wings. The Void was getting easier and easier to navigate and fly in, the more time he spent there. He plunged back into the planet, picturing himself standing next to Luscious.

He found himself standing back in Godstep, in front of a building he immediately identified as a temple.

Of course—the temple must have some kind of blessing, from the great gods. Lush must be inside, and I can't port there. This is as close as my powers will take me.

The temple was a low, triangular building that had been decorated with mosaics of the gods. A stairway led up to the front door. Harry flapped his wings once, which brought him to the top of the stairs, and entered the temple.

The torches were lit. Luscious lay in the middle of the floor, curled over on her side. She seemed to be disintegrating at the edges, curling away into smoke. Shocked into silence, Harry leapt over and knelt at her side. Her glow was weak, feeble, nearly nonexistent, and she was trembling. Harry rolled her over. Her face was streaked with tears, and she flinched away from him.

"Lush!" he cried, panicked. Did she overextend herself? I still have plenty of power. How did she weaken so fast? No... this is more than that.

She opened one eye and looked at him. "What do you want," she whispered, sounding defeated. Her glow was so pale and he could barely see her expression. Only his own blue light illuminated the inside of the room.

"What happened to you?" Harry asked. What could have done this to her?

"Intuition," Lush whispered, and then added strangely, "Leave me alone. Why do you care?"

"Intuition was here?" he asked, glancing around the three corners of the room. She's escaped my notice once, she can do it again.

Lush shook her head. "No," she wheezed, "She didn't have to come. She'd been in my head before; she could get into it again."

She turned her face away. Harry pushed her hair out of her face and placed his hand on her cheek, turning her face to him. "Look at me. It's just me... why are you shaking?" It bothered him to see her like this. Normally Lush is every inch a fighter... how did Intuition make her give up like this?

Lush tried to curl up tighter. "She took everything. My hope, my power..." she said in a low voice. "Let me die."

"What?" Harry yelled, and she flinched again. "What are you talking about? You're a goddess, you can't die. You're my only real ally against Intuition! My mortal friends, they can fight the Ice Lizards, but against Intuition we're alone."

"I can't die," Luscious granted. "But I can fade, and go away for a time. Not exist." She sounded like this thought this was a nice prospect.

Harry frowned, and asked awkwardly "... can I help you?" For the moment he didn't care about their history. She had proved herself a good ally so far, and he was desperate.

"No," she said quietly, but resolutely. "Go away." She closed her eyes and continued slowly disintegrating.

Even though she couldn't see it, Harry shook his head in denial. He carefully scooped her up into his arms, and she had no weight to her, she was like a bundle of smoke. He felt like he was leaving wisps of her behind as he got to his feet.

Lush seemed so fragile all of a sudden.

He ported them to the round room of Sky's End. Once there, he headed for the door with the golden sun, the only place Harry knew of that was 'home' to Luscious. He stood in front of the door for a moment, long enough that Harry thought the door might not open for them, but after a delay it slowly swung open. The room inside was dark, and as he stepped inside his blue glow gave him enough light to find his way to the center of the room, where the golden throne sat empty. Harry hesitated, looking around the throne room. There were no beds or surfaces to lay her down on except the floor, and for a moment he considered setting her down on the throne, but he couldn't see how he could place her comfortably. Finally he just sat down on it himself. He rested Lush on his lap, and instinctively held her close, she was curled up with her head resting against his shoulder and her feet trailing away into smoke.

The door to the round room had closed. Lush didn't say anything, Harry wasn't sure if she was aware of her surroundings. It occurred to him that this was the godlike equivalent of being wounded. Lush doesn't have a body; she's made entirely of... god stuff, whatever it is. Power, I suppose. So if Intuition siphoned away some of her power, Lush would be very weakened... I wonder how she did it. It must be something the major gods are capable of.

Time passed by. Harry said nothing, and Lush remained motionless. Harry bit his lip with worry and impatience.

Finally, her eyes opened. "Why are you doing this? You hate me."

Harry shook his head. "I don't hate you. I haven't hated you for quite some time. Stay. I need you." He couldn't imagine facing Intuition all alone.

She blinked at him. "You do?"

Harry nodded. "So hold on, and pull yourself together," he pleaded. "Okay?"

"Okay," Lush said faintly. They sat in silence again. Harry wasn't sure if he was imagining it, but he thought she might be coalescing, gaining weight. The process was slow, and Harry let his eyes drift shut and leaned his head back, finally relaxing into the golden seat.

He fell into a sort of sleep, and his mind drifted for a time. She's coming back. She's going to be okay.

Author's Note: By the way, there's all sorts of back-story going on that I'm not even telling you! There's a meaning behind that look Unea sent the Chief-King. I mentioned Rosabel again; she's in another story of mine. And of course there's more going on with Lush. Tell me: do you love Lush, or hate her? I actually started writing up some of her back-story, basically parts of Hell Eyes told from her point of view, kind of explaining her actions. Would anybody be interested in that? I'm interested to hear what people think of Lush.

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## Chapter Forty-Seven: Alone

Harry awoke slowly, with dawning surprise that he had been able to sleep. I must have needed the rest. He opened his eyes.

Lush was still sitting on his lap, leaning an elbow on the armrest of the throne and resting her chin on it. Her red eyes were soft, and gazing thoughtfully at his face. He blinked to find her face so close. She seemed to have reversed the process of disintegrating, and put herself back together. Her glow was back and brighter than ever, and the room itself had transformed. The golden walls were reflecting her glow like shiny mirrors, and the floor, which had been a thick carpet under his feet hours before, was gone. It had disappeared, gone invisible, or turned to glass. It was as if the throne were floating, and beneath them was nothing but clouds. Every now and then the clouds parted, and Harry swore he could see glimpses of Origin's surface down below.

"What happened?" Harry asked, confused.

Lush smiled slightly. "My mother's throne has accepted me in her absence. I've taken her place, as the sun."

"Did you know you could do that?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. But it makes sense if you think about it. You and I, as born gods, were created almost entirely from the exact power that our parents are made of. So I have the same essence as my mother." Her face changed, became vulnerable again. She touched his face. "You saved me."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, a bit embarrassed. He could remember pleading with her to stay, and it all seemed so dramatic in retrospect.

"When you picked me up, you transferred some of your energy to me. Don't worry; you've regenerated all of it by now. That's why you were tired, I was draining you slightly. But without it, I would have ceased to exist." She looked over the edge of the throne proudly. "And you

brought me to the one place where this would happen. So now we've discovered how to bring back the sun."

"You'll need to stay here," Harry realized. "We need the sun. Can Intuition attack you again?"

Lush shook her head. "The throne, this room... they were created by my father for my mother. I'm safe here."

"That means I have to face Intuition alone," Harry stated, feeling like he had just swallowed a rock.

Lush nodded sadly. "If I leave, the sun will go out again."

"I'm on my own then," Harry said with a sigh. He'd enjoyed having somebody at his back. He only wished he'd kept a closer eye on her, he didn't expect Intuition's attack to be so sneaky. I should have noticed when she stopped fighting, he thought guiltily.

"Do you think it's time to bring in the portal guides?" Harry asked. I hate bringing them back from Fraizha after they're only just settling in there. I had hoped they wouldn't have to go through the ordeal of working with the Hands again, but it looks like I have no choice.

"Maybe," Lush said. "How do you intend on doing that?"

"There are not many options on Origin," he said, and shook his head, "Everything's been tried before. Spells to keep them cold need too much power and can't be held up for very long. So I guess we'll spread them out, and go with the classic Hand situation. If they agree, of course. I'll need to talk to Aadon, and to the Queen."

Harry remembered something. "I told Aadon to keep Olen close by. Maybe I can reach them from here. That will go faster."

He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the feeling of being watched. He was less comfortable than when Enna had watched him, and eventually he gave up. "I'll go there directly," he decided. He got up carefully as Lush transferred herself to the throne and lounged in the seat, crossing her legs comfortably.

"Good luck," she murmured.

Queen Aeyris stood in front of a large glass window in the City Hall, one hand touching the glass. On the other side, the horizon glowed a pastel orange, and it was steadily brightening.

"The sun..." she murmured. The loss of the sun had affected her greatly, and lessened her faith in the Gods. She hadn't even realized how much until it had returned. She felt a little silly—she only saw the sun when she left Everdark anyway, but at least it had always been there. A fundamental part of the world wasn't supposed to just... fall out like that.

"It's back," Iz finished, smiling widely. "The ice lizards withdrew when the light appeared on the horizon. The other gods must be fighting Intuition."

"I wonder why they sent those two to talk to us," The Chief-King mused from where he was sitting nearby. He was covered in many small cuts, and a Silent Healer was slowly touching them one by one, healing them. "I mean, I know of the Goddess of Desire merely because she is my own God's daughter, and the Portal Guide God is very new. I got the impression they were... teenagers. And then when we needed help, they were the only gods fighting. Is that all the help they sent us? Where are the other gods?"

Aeyris shrugged; she couldn't guess.

Almost everyone from their earlier meeting was back in the front hall, except for the mermaids. They were sitting around the room in small groups having separate conversations. Still, when the door opened everyone took notice.

Lord Duran was carried in, his shirt front covered in blood; he had insisted on going out to fight. Rosabel shrieked and got to her feet, running over to her husband. Lord Duran was carefully put down on the floor, and the Healer flitted over to attend to him.

"What happened?" Rosabel demanded of the two humans who had been carrying him.

"One of the human mages from the other side cut him with some kind of spell," one of them said. "And was about the cut his throat too, but this woman saved his life."

They had been followed inside by two other humans: One of them was a slender, beautiful woman, about thirty years old with silvery blond hair in a braid that went to her waist, wearing practical clothing and carrying a thin sharp sword. At her side was a huge, hulking barbarian. He was nearly the same size as the Bloodbeast Chief-King, who was the largest person Aeyris knew. He had copious amounts of tangled red hair, he was shirtless and bulging with muscle, and he carried a large war-axe.

The woman had sky blue eyes that were lit up with a kind of fierce happiness, and her grin was wide and mischievous.

Lord Duran looked disgusted. Rosabel, upon seeing the blond woman, stopped in her tracks, and let out a little gasp. Her hands went immediately to the ruffles of her dress, and her hands tightened into fists until her knuckles were white.

"Hello Rose," the blond woman greeted her.

"Elizabeth," Rosabel said stiffly, "My name is Rosabel now."

This seemed to amuse Elizabeth. "This is Red," she said, nodding at her Barbarian, "At least that's what I call him. He doesn't speak any language I know. I'm not even sure what planet he comes from. But we get along just fine."

There was an awkward silence.

"Thank you for saving my husband," Rosabel finally said.

"You're welcome!" Elizabeth accepted with relish, grinning at Rosabel's obvious discomfort.

Suddenly there was an extra person in the room, and everyone jumped with surprise. It was an older Cursed with gray hair, he had a certain dignity about him and he waited patiently for them to adjust to his presence, arms folded. Aeyris recognized him immediately. It hadn't been all too long since her 'lesson' on Fraizha.

"My name is Aadon," he introduced himself. "I'm here to speak to Queen Aeyris on behalf of Fraizha."

Everyone looked at Aeyris. She nodded, and Aadon stepped over to her side.

"I don't know if we've ever been properly introduced," Aadon said, offering his hand.

Aeyris took it delicately. "No, I guess not."

"I have come to offer the services of my people," Aadon told her. "They heard about what's happening here, and they have volunteered to help."

Aeyris' eyebrow rose. "They'll come back and help us?" she repeated hopefully. Aadon nodded. Inside, Aeyris' hopes were soaring. If we had the Cursed back, we would have a chance!

"Even though we hoped not to," Aadon informed her, "We can't see any other choice than to reform the Hands."

"Very well," Aeyris replied, trying to hide her glee. She turned to Iz, "Iz, send word that all the Hands are to report to the front of the City Hall."

Iz left. Most of the people in the room were still eyeing Aadon nervously, but the Queen and the Portal Guide Leader ignored them.

"So how are things going on Fraizha?" Aeyris asked politely. "Has Kazerin finished his wall yet? How's Olen?"

"The wall is nearing completion," Aadon told him. "It's quite a masterpiece. And Olen is doing quite well."

"Olen doesn't have a Hand," Aeyris realized, "What will he do? Is he coming?"

"He's a little young," Aadon said with a disapproving frown. "But he has a high degree of control over himself. I'm considering letting him come to the City, and perhaps fight here rather than venture out where some of the more violent fighting will be taking place."

"It will?"

"Yes, well, that's where the Hands will be, won't they?"

"Quite right," Aeyris agreed.

Somebody else ported into the room next to Aadon, causing Rosabel to let out a high squeak. Elizabeth, still standing by the door, looked at her in amazement and let out a short laugh. Rosabel looked insulted.

Harry didn't greet Aeyris, but merely folded his arms and gave her a look.

"Hello Harry," Aeyris said. She looked at Aadon, then at Harry, then back at Aadon, and finally decided that they weren't going to lose their minds and attack each other, and settled down. "Why the frown?"

"You accused me of working for Intuition," Harry reminded her.

Aeyris winced. "So you heard about that. Well..." she looked around, making sure nobody could overhear her before continuing, "I'm sorry."

"Truly?"

"Yes." Aeyris nodded. "I felt bad about it almost right away. I know we had sort of an understanding recently, but you have to see how it made me feel when you dragged my daughter through the Void. It made me doubt you all over again, especially when you wouldn't even stop to explain."

Harry considered this. He nodded. “Yes, I suppose I can see your point.”

“You took the princess into the Void?” Aadon interrupted. “Were you trying to kill her?”

“No!” Harry cried. “It’s complicated.”

“But I must know: what happened to my daughter?” Aeyris interrupted.

“First you have to tell me how she’s doing,” Harry insisted. “Is she okay?”

Aeyris paused, a moment in which Harry felt his heart sinking, but then she said, “She’s doing better. She hasn’t woken up yet, so we don’t know if her mind is affected, but physically she’s recovering.”

Harry breathed a sigh.

“That’s impossible,” Aadon muttered. He shot a sideways glance at Harry, as if he suspected Harry wasn’t telling the whole story.

“So?” Aeyris prompted, anxious to hear the story.

“I couldn’t see any other way,” Harry explained. “When Darling—that’s the bird—“Harry explained to Aadon, “turned into an ice lizard and kidnapped Enna—“

“What?!” Aadon interrupted, bewildered.

“Intuition told us it was a ‘true shapeshifter’.”

Aadon’s eyes widened in wonder, “They’re real?” He appeared impressed.

“Get on with the story,” Aeyris said impatiently. “Ok, so shapeshifters are real. What happened?”

"I followed it to the Ice Lizard planet," Harry continued. "Where Intuition was waiting for me. It was a trap set to keep me out of the way. She said if I left the Ice Lizards would kill Enna; she intended for me to stay on the Ice Lizard planet while she attacked Origin. But this was before anyone knew who was behind the Ice Lizards, and I figured somebody had to tell the Gods so the Gods could stop her. Enna agreed, and wanted to take the risk of going through the Void. So I brought her to you, and then went to the home of the Gods to tell them about Intuition."

"Oh." Aeyris said faintly. "The home of the Gods. You can go there?"

Harry shrugged.

There was a commotion outside, the Hands were gathering. The three of them moved into the doorway. At the bottom of the stairs the large crowd of Silents in dark blue uniforms saw two Cursed, and gasped. They recognized Harry immediately; he was infamous.

"I've called you here," Aeyris said loudly, "because your former Cursed—" here Harry gave her a pointed look, "—ahem, Portal Guides, have agreed to come back and fight in the war."

"We would like you to do your old jobs for a short time," Harry continued, "And help them direct their anger to the enemy."

The Silents buzzed with conversation, excited.

"They will come one by one," Aadon explained, "And find their Hands, which will then have to go somewhere far from here so the next Portal Guide can come through."

"Iz will direct you to a point far away from the City," Aeyris said, nodding at General Iz who returned a short bow. "We will spread you out as much as possible so that there is little chance of the Portal Guides crossing paths, in this climate that is too warm for them," she finished politely.

Gray, Sariah, Jon, and Vosenn with Draco at her side all came hurrying up the stairs, and Harry stepped back into the City Hall with them.

"Harry!" Sariah said happily, giving him a big hug.

Harry smiled to see them. "Hey. I won't be fighting as a Hand, you know that right?"

They nodded. "We figured as much," Gray said, "You seem to have other things to do."

Draco nodded gravely at Harry, who nodded back.

"We've been fighting," Vosenn told him, "And we'll continue to do so. Where have you been?"

"Around," Harry said, "Fraizha and the home of the Gods. I had to let them know what's going on."

"We saw two of them!" Sariah said excitedly. "The one we'd seen before, but she'd apparently been... toned down, then. They were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Practically blinded everyone," Jon added. "One of them was your uh... you know. But she seemed to have a thing for the God she was with."

"That's good," Harry pretended, wincing. Have a thing for? "She won't come after me any more then."

"If that's what you want," Jon said with a shrug.

Sariah punched him in the shoulder, hard enough that he jumped in surprise and looked at her. "What?"

"Are you suggesting Harry should leave Enna? Now, that she's practically on her deathbed?" Sariah demanded.

"No!" Jon replied quickly, embarrassed, "Never mind."

"I have to go back to Fraizha," Harry said, "Take care of yourselves."

"Bye," they chorused.

Later in the day, the Hands were carefully placed at a distance from the City and from each other, and the fighters were refreshed and back at the front lines, but the Ice Lizards still kept their distance.

"They are waiting for dark to attack," The Chief-King predicted, now fully healed.

Aeyris stood at another window, one facing the other direction, watching the sun near the other horizon. "I agree."

Elizabeth and her Barbarian had left, and Iz had left with Harry's old Hand. The City Lords, the Chief-King, the Centaur Elders and several others were still in their meeting room.

"The second the sun dips behind those mountains, the Ice Lizards will be everywhere," The Chief-King stated. "I should go out to the front lines."

"Wait until the messengers start coming in," Aeyris suggested, "Then you know where they're hitting the hardest and you can go where you're needed the most."

They made feeble conversation as they morosely watched the sun set closer and closer to the horizon. Finally it seemed to be resting on the mountains to the west. Then it lifted back up.

"Hold on!" Aeyris shouted, "It's stopped!"

Everyone ran to a window.

"It's turned around and is going back!" one of the Centaur elders said, as the sun rose a little more.

"That means it won't be setting," The Chief-King cried victoriously in his booming voice, making everyone near him jump. "The Ice Lizards will figure out the same thing and attack anyway, but we won't have to fight them off in the dark."

"Yes!" Aeyris cheered.

Sure enough, soon reports were coming in that the Ice Lizards had returned, but before the Chief-King could return to Godstep there was a crackle of blue lighting in the middle of the room. Everyone froze and stared.

The blue lightning struck again, and in its place was the young Portal Guide God.

"Hello," Harry said calmly, hoping his entrance hadn't been too dramatic.

Aeyris immediately looked embarrassed; she knew she had been too forward with him last time they had spoken. To make up for it now, she curtseyed low.

"You managed to bring the sun back," the Chief-King commented.  
"We thank you; it will really turn things around for us."

"Thank Luscious," Harry replied, "She's the one who's doing it. She took her mother's place as the sun."

"If I may ask," the Chief-King wondered, "Where is her mother? And what does the god of my people, Wrath have to say about all this?"

Harry was reluctant to answer, and so he hesitated.

Aeyris jumped in surprise as outside somebody screamed.

"THE GODS HAVE FORSAKEN US!" Somebody yelled through the open door, and Aeyris hurried over to look out. Through the door, Harry could see people running around in panic in the streets.

One of the Silents Aeyris had been using as a messenger came staggering through the door, eyes wide.

“Explain!” Aeyris shouted at him. “What’s going on?”

“The Gods—“he gasped, but then stopped, seeing Harry, unable to continue.

“The Gods did what?” Aeyris prompted, annoyed.

The messenger kept his eyes on Harry as he said tentatively, “They have turned against us. They sent the Black Storm to Godstep. The sun was blocked by dark clouds, and our people are being slaughtered by... something... an invisible force. Nobody has seen what it is.”

“What?!” Harry yelled, and the messenger flinched. Harry couldn’t help it— slivers of blue lightening crackled over his skin, striking the ground in his vicinity. Everyone took several steps back, frightened. “The Black Storm is under my command! And I didn’t order them to attack!”

“Them?” Aeyris repeated uncomprehendingly.

“So Intuition has somehow taken control of the Black Storm, but you say it belongs to you,” The Chief-King clarified. “Can you get it back?” he asked Harry.

“I have a pretty good idea of how she did it,” Harry said darkly, voice near a growl. “I’ll take care of it.”

He disappeared from the City Hall, transporting himself instantly to the small town of Godstep, where the sky was dark and the sun was obscured. The streets were writhing with Ice Lizards, and there was a Dementor at every corner. The remaining fighters in the town were losing fast, against the pressure of their regular foes and the invisible force that was cutting them down.

The invisible force Harry could see, of course. It was his own Black Storm, twenty-something Cursed Silents with swords on the god's plane of existence.

How could I be so stupid? Harry berated himself. I forgot about the Black Storm! I didn't even wonder where they went when the Gods disappeared. Now Intuition has them fighting for her.

"STOP!" Harry yelled, standing on the tallest building he could find, projecting his voice over the town. "I am your rightful Storm Leader. Stop immediately!"

The Black Storm lowered their weapons, looking at him incredulously.

One of them approached. "You deserted us," he accused in a low voice.

"I explained myself to you," Harry countered. "I was here, trying to stop this war from happening. Only now I find you fighting for the other side!"

The members of the Black Storm merely looked confused. They all took to the air, dark wings flapping. The sky remained dark, and a wind picked up. They hovered just above the town, looking doubtfully at Harry.

Etilon ported to the forefront, grinning fiercely in Harry's direction. Harry wasn't surprised: he had yet to see Intuition, Etilon or Alexander and had wondered at their absence.

"Etilon," Harry said with a steely glare. "I thought you would have something to do with this."

"What can I say?" Etilon asked. "You made it very easy. You left them all alone, without any instructions. The Gods left without giving them an explanation. So they kept doing their regular training regimen... the one I taught them. So I intercepted them one day and pointed out what a disappointing Storm Leader you were. So thanks for being such a bad example."

Harry realized Etilon was trying to bait him, and so he tried to keep his temper, but still he gritted his teeth and replied through them, "If you hadn't been helping Intuition stir up trouble elsewhere, I wouldn't have had so many problems."

"What is he talking about, Etilon?" one of the Black Storm asked.

"When Intuition has won her war," Etilon announced, ignoring the questioner, "She will make me a God!"

"No one can be made into a God," Harry objected. "I mean, from what I understand and everything my Grandfather has told me."

"You sound very knowledgeable," Etilon said mockingly. "But I disagree. The great Gods can do anything they want."

"No they can't," Harry objected again. "There are rules."

"Oh yes?" Etilon laughed. "And who will enforce these rules? You?"

Harry folded his arms. "Yes. If there is nobody else, I will!" Etilon just laughed harder.

"He promised us that when Intuition makes him a God," the same Cursed said, "He will be our God and free the Cursed from oppression."

"You already have a God," Harry said with exasperation. "Me. And I already freed the Portal Guides."

"He lies!" Etilon declared. "As we flew here, did we not see our own people in the bondage of their Hands?" His face contorted.

The Black Storm murmured agreement darkly.

"I made them a planet. They've been staying there until the war broke out, then they came back by their own free will. They volunteered to help," Harry explained to them.

The tone of their muttering changed, and they looked at Etilon uneasily.

"Attack him," Etilon ordered one of the nearest Portal Guides.

The Portal Guide shot him a troubled look, and shook his head. The one behind was clearly more loyal to Etilon and stepped out in front.

"I will do it!" he said, lifting his sword. But then something happened: his hand cramped, clenching and then losing his hold on his weapon, and the strength in his arm faltered. His arm dropped limply to his side, and the sword spun away. He looked astonished.

"Don't be a fool;" one of his comrades told him archly, "You can't hurt the rightful Storm Leader. It's an edict laid on us by Dark Eyes himself and can't be disobeyed. You'll get headaches even thinking about it."

Harry found this interesting. He didn't know the Gods could enforce their will on people in that particular way (only in the way Intuition hijacked Alexander's mind) but he supposed it had something to do with the undead state of the Black Storm. He raised an eyebrow at Etilon, wondering what the wild Portal Guide would do next. When I first met him, he was under this mask... he was in control. As soon as things went off the plan, he became... fanatical, and unpredictable. Though I can pretty much expect him to rant and gnash his teeth at me.

"We won't help you," one of the Black Storm said to Etilon. "As you can see, we can't, and I wouldn't help you anyway. What happened to you, Etilon? You were our leader for hundreds of years, and I've never seen you fall apart like this." Others nodded, putting away their weapons. The one who had tried to lift his sword against Harry sighed, looking at Etilon warily, as if their former Storm Leader would explode at any second.

Etilon muttered something about having to do everything himself, and pulled out a long, sharp sword. "Well, clearly this edict doesn't apply to me anymore. Maybe because I'm the former Strom Leader, but I prefer to think it's because I have become something more."

Harry wasn't sure if the sword would hurt him, but just in case he brightened his protective aura and shot a bolt of blue lightning at Etilon, expecting it to knock him out of the sky.

The lightning hit Etilon, and crackled a moment over his skin before disappearing and leaving him unaffected. Etilon grinned, and moments later he was surrounded by his own protective aura, of a telltale pure white.

"Intuition," Harry cursed. "She's put some kind of protection on you." That would make things harder.

Etilon didn't respond in words, but launched himself at Harry, kicking him in the gut. God or no, it hurt, and there was a strong tingling in the area where the white aura around Etilon touched Harry's own blue.

Immediately Etilon raised his sword, swinging it down at Harry's neck while he was bent over, but Harry had immediately shot backwards with one huge flap of his wings. Harry's hand moved almost in a blur as he grabbed Etilon's wrist, squeezing until Etilon's grip faltered and the sword clattered down against a roof below.

At that point most of the Black Storm arranged itself around Etilon in a circle, weapons back in hand.

"Give up Etilon," one of them said. "Don't make us do this."

Etilon looked around at them with contempt, but realized he was outnumbered. A moment later he was gone.

Everyone looked at Harry.

He folded his arms. "I guess I better explain everything to you," he said. "It's a long story, and no doubt you'll have a part in it before it's over."

## Chapter Forty-Eight: The Ice Lizard War

Three weeks later.

The vast lawn in front of Hogwarts Castle.

Usually occupied by small groups of students, lounging in the sun, studying, or flying brooms, today it was the location of mass activity. Teeming with life, it was occupied by large crowds of people, standing facing the center, towards one man. There were Aurors, Ministry Officials, Hogwarts professors, a few of-age students, civilian wizard volunteers, and even a misplaced looking herd of centaurs from the Forbidden Forest.

The old man was confronted by a short, fat woman with an obscene bow on her head, and her number of supporters.

"This is ridiculous!" she crowed, turning to the man beside her, "Fudge, how can you possibly allow this?"

"Dolores, please..." Fudge stammered. He was unused to this side of her, she usually simpered and giggled in his presence, at least most of the time, but at the moment she was quite a different person— her true self.

Dumbledore continued to ignore her.

"They all volunteered," Fudge explained to her, "And I've already signed the permit for the portal."

"Well, un-sign it!" Dolores Umbridge stamped her foot. Noting that the centaurs were staring at her, she paled, and continued with less vehemence, "Headmaster, you can't possibly be serious about taking your own students, as well as the rest of these misfits, on some hare-brained stint to another world—which I've never heard of myself, and I sincerely doubt its existence—and fighting in some war you hope to find there. A war, Dumbledore? These are some of our best and brightest, and you intend on subjecting them to the risks of... of a war?!"

"They have quite the convincing argument," Fudge continued when Dumbledore didn't respond.

"You know what I heard, Minister?" Umbridge's voice rose to a squeak, "That the people they intend on fighting this war for, aren't people at all." She looked at him seriously, and then sent a look of pure disgust at the person standing on the other side of Dumbledore.

Dignified and calm, Madalena stood with her arms crossed between the headmaster and Minerva McGonagall, her wings partially folded against her back. Those not looking to Dumbledore were watching Madalena with wonder on their faces.

Dumbledore finally responded. "They may not be human, but they are still people. And the students who are accompanying us are of age and have insisted."

"You're doing this because of Harry Potter," Umbridge spat. "I heard about what happened at your school, Headmaster. I knew there was something wrong with that one. Minister, if you have any sense left, you will forbid them all from setting a foot through this supposed portal!"

"Dolores Umbridge," Severus Snape said in a cutting tone, stepping up beside Dumbledore, "If I remember correctly, you are unwelcome on Hogwarts grounds. As you would know if you'd been paying any attention, Voldemort and his Death Eaters have gone to this planet and have attacked it. And if you are still naïve enough to believe that Voldemort's return is a sham, there are still these Ice Lizard creatures and a powerful Goddess on the other side of that portal, tearing the planet Origin and its inhabitants to bits. Once Origin has been destroyed, they will turn to Earth next, and the war will wage here in our own homes. It will not be concealable to the muggles, although at that point it would be irrelevant because we do not have the strength to fight them on our own and we will die, as will every being ever created. If we go to Origin now and join forces with the people there, we will have a chance, and we can perhaps avoid bringing this war here to us all."

"Like I said," Fudge said weakly, "A convincing argument."

"I don't believe in Goddesses," Umbridge argued.

"Whether she is or is not a Goddess isn't the point," Minerva McGonagall said. "I don't entirely believe in her myself, but Madalena assures us that the Gods of her planet are real. This Intuition exists in any case. Even if not a Goddess, she is a powerful elemental of some kind and nearly undefeatable."

"But—"

The Minister of Magic gathered some measure of resolve, saying, "That's enough Dolores. The decision is made."

As if to punctuate this remark, something happened that made most people jump in surprise even though they had been expecting it.

In an area kept clear by a red circle, in front of which Dumbledore and the Minister waited like a delegation, a person suddenly appeared. It was a young man, who could have been any of Dumbledore's own students if it weren't for the large elegant wings that sprouted from his back, covered in a downy layer of black feathers. They flared in the air as he landed lightly on his feet and greeted them with a wide grin that split his face nearly from ear to ear.

Seeing all who waited for him, he gave a small playful bow, as if his appearance had been a performance. Then he trotted up to Dumbledore, immediately recognizing the Headmaster from his description.

"Hello!" The young winged man said cheerfully with a wave. "So... war! Exciting huh? I'm Olen."

Madalena raised an eyebrow. "You're Olen?"

Olen nodded. "Uh-huh. Here's the portal you asked for." He gestured at the empty circle. "You can't see it of course, but I do. It'll work."

"They say that sometimes your God speaks to you in dreams," Madalena said, "And that you relay these messages to your leader. I expected someone... older."

Olen just grinned anew. "It's true. He's quite nice."

Fudge looked astonished. "Very well young Olen, I won't be coming to your planet myself, but I'm sending some of my best men over there." Professor Snape snorted quietly. Part of the reason they were coming to the war so late was that they had fought the Minister tooth and nail for a whole week to do this legally, even after volunteers had committed themselves. "Give my regards to those in charge," Fudge continued, then checked a piece of paper. "Your God of course, and uh... Queen Arr..."

"Aeyris," Madalena supplied.

"Right," Fudge nodded. "Well I'll just get out of your way, then." He stepped back through the crowd, followed by a cowed Dolores Umbridge and her muttering supporters.

Olen nodded respectfully at Dumbledore, saying, "Now if you excuse me, I should greet the others." He turned and headed straight for the Centaur herd. Once there he introduced himself and thanked them, while the humans watched with some amazement. He treated the Centaurs with the same respect he had accorded Dumbledore.

"His parents taught him manners," Madalena observed. "On our planet, the leaders of all races are considered equal."

"He seems terribly young," Minerva McGonagall said, worry in her voice. "Is he fighting in this war as well?"

Madalena smiled kindly, "That, my friends, is a Fraizhan. He fought his way through the unlivable landscape of the Gods to get here, and used magic beyond our comprehension to create a portal that others can safely travel back. He could take apart your Hogwarts castle piece by piece with his bare hands, and a single feather from his wings is so sharp that it could neatly cut through flesh and bone. Don't underestimate any of his kind."

Minerva frowned with her eyebrows as she watched the young portal guide. "And Harry is one of these Fraizhans."

"He's the Fraizhan. The Original. He was the first to find their planet, and he freed the others to join him. Before that they were kept in underground prisons, practically slaves. Why do you think Lily and James fled Origin when they found out what their son was?"

"Harry did this when?" Minerva asked.

"Several months ago," Madalena smiled. "He's a singularly determined individual."

Olen spared them deeper contemplation of these hard-to-imagine subjects by returning to their side, grin in place. "You ready?" He was followed by the leader of the Forbidden Forest centaurs, Magorian, who gave them a nod in greeting.

Dumbledore nodded gravely, in answer to Olen's question and in greeting of the Centaur leader.

"What should we expect on the other side?" Minerva asked.

"The portal leads to the square in front of City Hall, in the human city of God's Landing. That's the base of operations for our side," Olen explained.

"We've been there before," Dumbledore assured him. "I'll go through first. Minerva, Madalena and Severus, stay with me so that we can immediately meet with the City Lords while the others pass through the portal. Magorian, if you would join us?" The centaur nodded.

"I will stay and make sure everyone makes it through," Olen said, "And then I'll close the portal up, at least for now. I'll be around, if you need a portal opened just ask Aadon."

Dumbledore nodded and stepped into the red circle, the others with him. As they neared the spot where the portal allegedly was placed, the crowds on the lawn became silent as they watched in suspense.

But all that disappeared after another step forward, and everything changed, even the light. It took on a strange quality, almost fractured, brighter in some places, darker in others. Dumbledore, Minerva, Severus, Madalena and Magorian were standing in the middle of a street in front of the tall, imposing City Hall. Due to the strange light and the hunched shoulders of the humans lining the street waiting for their arrival, the mood was grim.

The five of them ascended the stairs, and behind them their Earth army of wizards and centaurs began to slowly shuffle through the portal, appearing out of thin air and then moving down the street to make space.

Lord Laike was standing at the top of the stairs, he bowed slightly in greeting. "Welcome to Origin," he said. "Albus, Minerva and Severus, it's a pleasure to see you again." He was quickly introduced to Magorian, who was taking his new surroundings his stride but still seemed a little startled that everyone treated him on equal footing as Dumbledore. "And of course you, Madalena; our family is inside."

"Our family?" Minerva repeated.

"Madalena is the older sister of my son-in-law," Lord Laike said with a smile. Something had changed about him; despite the war he had a new energy.

"Oh really?" Minerva said. "We thought that you were just part of Ren's cover, you really are her grandfather?"

Lord Laike nodded.

The majority of the new Earth troops were left outside on the street, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and Magorian followed Madalena and Lord Laike inside. They took a grand staircase up two floors, Magorian's hooves clattering loudly on the marble as he was unused to being indoors. They went down a long wide hallway bustling with activity, and up a smaller staircase into a round room. It was the base of a large tower, surrounded with windows that looked out in all directions. The wall space between windows was plastered with lists and maps marked up with pins and scribbled notes, even the

windows themselves had been written on. A far off mountain range had been traced in ink and enemy positions noted in fingerprints.

The room was very full, with representatives of all races except for the Mer. The other two City Lords were present; Gray was sitting in a corner holding his casting stone; there was a female Bloodbeast and an older Fraizhan. The table was covered in more paper, writing utensils, magical speaking devices, and beverages. A window had been left open, a mail slot for flying Silents, in front of which a stack of reports waited to be reviewed.

Most surprisingly, though Draco and most of the undercover students from Hogwarts were nowhere to be seen, Ron and Hermione were in the thick of it. Ron was scowling over a map and reading a report, and Hermione was deep in conversation with Lord Marr. Her fingers were stained with ink, matching the fingerprints on the window. She had been absentmindedly touching her face in thought, and now her lower lip and chin had faint blue marks.

Hermione saw them first, and got to her feet. “Headmaster! Finally, things have been tight here. I assume you’re brought help?”

The Headmaster and professors were taken aback.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, curious what her part in the war was.

“Excellent,” Hermione said in a businesslike voice. “We should get a roster of them immediately,” she started collecting papers, “Lord Marr, I need one of your secretaries to take care of that... we need to coordinate with RHT, some of them could use a break.” She looked back at the new comers. “We’re holding off a half circle around the City for now, and we’ve taken back Godstep. The merpeople have discouraged— well, sank, really— any attempts the enemy has put into rafts or boats so we’re secure on the ocean side. They’ll sound an alarm if anything tries to come by air that way.”

“Welcome to the Ice Lizard War,” Lord Duran said dryly, “You’ll find we don’t have much time to play host, we’re drained on resources at the moment. Pull up a chair.”

A note was send downstairs for a roster to be made, and the humans pulled up chairs, while Magorian stood behind them. Ron looked up and gave them a quick smile, nodding in greeting, but quickly looked back down as if afraid of loosing track of his work.

“You’ve been helping out, Hermione?” McGonagall asked.

“We contacted your Fudge when the war started,” Lord Duran said, “And he immediately shut down all travel and contact between our worlds. Since we suddenly had to deal with your... Death Eaters, the only knowledge we had on earth magic came from Ron, Hermione and Draco. Draco is out with RHT right now, Ron and Hermione fight when them on and off but they’ve also stepped up into leadership roles.”

“We had experience with Death Eaters from having Harry’s back all these years, and what we learned in Defense Against the Dark Arts and the D.A. The City Lords gave us as many human mages as they could dig up and Aeyris lent us a number of her mages, and we taught them as much as we could about dark magic in the time we’ve had,” Hermione explained, “We call them RHT, the Ron and Hermione trained troops. We send them out to areas with the most Death Eater activity, and they’ve been learning on the go. We should mix in some of your people with RHT, RHT can bring your people up to speed on the Ice Lizards and your people can teach them some more defensive spells.” Her voice was confident and decisive, and once again her Hogwarts professors were momentarily stunned.

“You two have your own troops?” Snape confirmed skeptically.

Hermione grinned and Ron looked up momentarily to smirk at his old Professor.

“And where is Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“Fighting, mostly,” Hermione said. “He’s really hard to keep track of. We keep careful tabs on all of the Portal Guides fighting, to keep them out of each others way, but he slips in and out. We see him now and then.”

McGonagall noticed that despite the crowded room there was an area in front of a window where no one stood; as they moved around they avoided the spot out of habit. There was a large square drawn on the ground in Hermione's blue ink, and the area around it was uncluttered.

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

"The Gods visited us a couple times at the beginning of the war," Lord Duran explained. "They haven't been around lately, at least not that we've seen, but we keep a spot clear in case they decide to materialize."

"Oh." McGonagall said. "You are all quite serious about this God business, aren't you?"

"Just wait until you see one," Hermione said gleefully, "It will blow your mind. Then you'll believe."

Luscious sat regally on her golden throne while Harry, standing beside her, concluded his meeting with the two Black Storm warriors he'd chosen as captains. He dismissed them and they disappeared.

Harry sat on the arm of the throne with a deep sigh, and Luscious rested her head on his side wearily. Harry could feel she was drawing energy from him, without realizing it, but he said nothing, knowing she needed it. She was low in strength again but reluctant to leave her throne for a much needed rest. Darkness would give the Ice Lizards and unacceptable edge. Because she was a Goddess she had gone without sleep for three weeks even though it made her miserable, but because of his mortal body Harry was unable to copy this feat. He had been pushing himself, but occasionally he napped on a borrowed golden cushion.

The door was narrowly open; their gaze through the doorway fell right upon the Eye, where occasionally they could see Dark Eyes moving. If he were to try to get their attention they would see it, but he hadn't made any attempt to communicate with them.

"How long can we keep this up?" Luscious murmured, "Nothing's moving, nothing's happening. Our people are defending themselves... barely."

"Our people?" Harry repeated. "Grown attached, Lush?"

Luscious smiled slightly. "Naturally. Even if I don't know them personally, I've put so much of myself into their survival I don't think I could handle their loss."

Harry smiled at this, but then became serious. "Where is Intuition?" he wondered, not for the first time. "I almost wish she would just show up so we could settle this," he said, though his stomach knotted at the thought. "Not to mention I've got some questions I'd like answered."

"We could draw her out," Luscious suggested.

Harry hesitated. "Not yet."

Harry had moved some of the many mirrors from Lush's mother's room into the throne room, where Lush had enchanted them like Dark Eye's windows. They were unable to follow people or movement like the Eye, but they showed fixed locations, including Godstep, the front of City Hall, and the Strategy Tower. He noted the crowds of cloaks in front of City Hall and the new faces in the tower and smiled to himself.

"I'm going down," Harry said, and Lush squeezed his hand in farewell. He gave her a reassuring smile and ported out.

Draco was the leader of an RHT unit, with Vosenn accompanying them they hunted Death Eaters. They heard from a passing Silent that there was a magical battle near the coast below the City, and they headed swiftly in that direction. Vosenn and two Silent mages in his group flew overhead, watching for ambushes.

On their way they passed a galloping herd of centaurs heading out from the City. Draco noticed something strange about the Centaurs; they were a mixed bunch, only some were the typical deer-like Originals, there were several with long swishy horse tails and their hooves were solid, not cleft. Earth Centaurs. The Earth Centaurs

were smaller, but determinedly keeping pace. Draco glanced up and exchanged surprised looks with Vosenn, who had also noticed. Draco gave a quick shrug and they continued on their way.

They heard the noise before they found the fight, the clashing of physical combat with an occasional staccato of magical explosions. As they came over the edge of the bluff, the beach below was a writhing mass of bodies. There were silver flashes of Ice Lizard skin, fury Bloodbeasts, flapping Silents and a great number of humans from the nearest village. On the far side was a large group of black cloaks, it was here that the magical explosions rocked the ground, and a variety of colors lit up the battle and reflected on the nearby ocean. Silently a spear sliced out of the waves and through the air, hitting one of the Death Eaters in the back. He succumbed to the poison almost immediately, collapsing into the sand. The next spear hit a magical defensive barrier and rolled back into the surf.

Nearby a woman slashed her sword, a long braid lashing out behind her head like a whip. At her side a red-headed barbarian fought like a cornered tiger.

Draco shouted a quick order. His unit was at his back as he pushed his way through the fight towards the Death Eaters. He immediately pulled out his wand and engaged one in a quick and dirty duel, but it was soon over and Draco's opponent lay face down in the sand. The next dark wizard behind him stepped up to take his place.

The Death Eater didn't attack immediately, looking at Draco through the holes in his mask. After a moment he reached up and pulled the mask away, letting it drop.

It was Draco's father, Lucius.

"Draco," Lucius said, sounding surprised and annoyed.

"Hello, Father," Draco said uneasily, but then he gathered his resolve and lifted his wand defensively. "How's Mother?"

"Disappointed in you," Lucius said, and narrowed his eyes. "They say you jumped through the portal on purpose. You were trying to run away, weren't you?"

"No," Draco shook his head, and then reconsidered, "Maybe a little. And there was... a girl."

Lucius looked at his son with contempt. "This is your chance, son. Join Voldemort now, join our side. Voldemort says when this world is conquered we will have everything we've ever desired. This land has much potential."

"You can't trust Voldemort," Draco argued, "And you can't trust Intuition either."

"Intuition?" Lucius didn't seem to know who she was.

"She's behind all of this. I don't know what she's promised Voldemort, but I wouldn't trust it to come true," Draco explained.

"So you refuse?"

Draco nodded. "Sorry Father. I will not fight against my friends."

Lucius' eyes narrowed in rage. "Then you will die with them!" His wand was pointed at Draco, and he looked right into his son's face, "Avada Ke—"

Draco tried to send a spell in return, but whatever it was it wasn't going to be fast enough. Mid curse, something hurtled from the sky above and slammed into Lucius, bringing him to the ground.

Vosenn jumped to her feet, wings arched fiercely. She pulled something from inside her pocket and hurled it at Lucius' face, who began screaming and thrashing on the ground. As his face melted, Draco found he couldn't watch and turned away, shaking. Finally the screams stopped, and Draco turned to find Vosenn standing right in front of him, her back to the body, looking at Draco with concern.

"Are you okay, Draco?" she asked, taking his hand.

Draco shook his head, a lump in his throat. "... That was my father."

Vosenn squeezed his hand in alarm and gasped. "Oh I'm so sorry Draco! Oh no!"

Seeing her distress Draco squeezed her hand back, and pulled her to him in a hug. "It's okay," he whispered. "He was trying to kill me."

Vosenn bit her lip, and still looked uneasy.

"Really, it's okay," he promised. "You saved my life."

Vosenn just nodded. "You'll never go back, will you?"

"No."

She ventured a small smile. "It's a good thing you have someplace to stay, then, right?"

"You mean it?"

"Yes. Stay with me."

He smiled back. "I will. Though we still have a war to fight first."

Harry passed over Draco's battle has he surveyed the area around the City. He noted it as a particularly large and active one, and finishing his circuit he headed around to the tower, landing invisibly on a ledge and peering in.

Of the Earth wizards, Dumbledore was the only newcomer present. The Chief-King had returned and was conferring quietly with his sister. Ron was gone, either to fight, train RHT or sleep. Hermione was there, at Lord Marr's side as usual. The old man had given some of his resources to her, and she was directing them about efficiently. She was looking... blue but optimistic. The City Lords, Aeyris, Dumbledore and Madalena were having a discussion. Aadon and Olen was leaning against the back wall and Olen immediately began

fidgeting, looking around as if sensing Harry's presence. Aadon looked at him curiously and Olen gave him a meaningful look.

Aadon and Olen began looking hopeful, and with a twinge of guilt Harry ported inside the blue square set aside for his use and decided to materialize. Lighting coursed over his body as it usually did when he exercised his powers, crackling to the ground and through his aura as he became visible.

Conversation stopped.

"Hello," Lord Duran said finally, and Aeyris echoed him. Aadon and Olen bowed slightly, Aadon giving him an ironic smile.

Harry nodded in greeting.

"Thank the Gods," the Chief-King said, "We've been hoping you would show up. The Black Storm has been sighted behind enemy lines, not close to any of our own. Your doing?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "The Black Storm is under my command, and can wipe out whole enemy camps. If they move into any areas that could be occupied with our people I'll give you advance warning to retreat."

Aeyris breathed an audible sigh of relief, and shivered at the thought of the mythical Black Storm of death.

"Thank you," the Chief-King said, and looked at Harry speculatively. "With respect, I would like to ask a few questions. Where is Wrath? Why has he not stopped Intuition's deadly mischief?"

Harry let out a deep sigh, looking at the expectant faces of all those in the room.

"Gone," Harry said bluntly. "They are gone."

There was a deepening silence.

"Gone... where?" Alexander Laike asked.

"The farthest reaches of the Void," Harry revealed, "I can't even begin to imagine where."

"... All of them?" One of the Centaur Elders asked weakly.

"All except Luscious and myself," Harry said. "She's occupied keeping the sun in the sky, so now... it's just me."

"Just you? Against Intuition?" Aeyris clarified with rising alarm.

Harry nodded. "It was part of Intuition's plan, to distract the Great Gods. The details are irrelevant, all you need know is that she has sent them as far away as they can possibly go, and I have no way of reaching them." Harry didn't want to tell about his Grandfather and the indignity he had suffered. "I'm young, and... not as powerful. If it came down to it, and I had to face her myself..." Harry just shook his head. "I would do my best."

"Why did you keep this from us for so long?"

"I wanted you to keep up hope. Would you have fought this hard, if you had known the truth?" There was an uncomfortable silence as response. "We needed to at least take the chance that we will win, and to do that we had to at least try. Now look at your people, out there holding their own. With the new reinforcements, we could win this war."

"Then what?" Lord Duran asked bitterly, "Is this all just a joke? Intuition is one of the Great Gods; no doubt she could crush us with a thought. Even when her people are gone she's not going to give up."

"Let me deal with Intuition," Harry said, "Keep fighting the Ice Lizards and the Death Eaters."

They nodded, but seemed deflated of energy and optimism.

"Don't let everything you've done these last three weeks be for nothing," Harry told him. "Don't give up now."

"Why aren't you fighting the Ice Lizards, like you did at the beginning?" The Chief-King asked.

"When we interfered, Intuition attacked us directly," Harry explained. "I'd prefer not to confront her unless I really have to. For now we can help you with the Black Storm and by keeping the sun up."

"Thank you," The Chief-King said and the others nodded. Dumbledore had remained silent through the entire exchange, watching Harry without recognizing him, eyes wide and delighted.

"I'll try to stop by again," Harry said, and disappeared.

(Author's Note: Summer again! I have some time to write... I never have time during the semester, so I only put out chapters around Winter, Spring and Summer break.

It's funny, since this whole story is around the time of Harry's sixth year of Hogwarts, I feel so... outdated. I'm writing about characters that are dead, and omitting important details of the later books. But this entire plot was pretty much laid out when the fifth book was out (though it began around the time of the second and third books), though I've embellished it considerable since then, don't expect to find anything about horcruxes. The last book was well written and I'm not trying to change or incorporate everything that happened later, I think that would only hurt the story. I'm just going to stick to my original plot and the HP world as far as book five, Even if it feels strange to me.)

## Chapter Forty-Nine: Welcome to Hell

After leaving the tower Harry flew over the area around the City one more time. The battle by the beach was still in full force, and had grown more violently enthusiastic. He watched the progress of the battle for nearly an hour, desperately wanting to jump in and help but hesitant to face Intuition yet. The whole war sometimes seemed so hopeless, when fighting Intuition was futile. Eventually it would come to that.

Finally it became too frustrating and he ported to a place he'd been avoiding: the Pit. He had waited long enough.

Harry wandered the hallways of the Pit, invisibly.

Finally he found the room where they were keeping Enna. It was a small room, with several doors. In the center of the room was a large high bed that dominated the space. Enna lay on the bed, looking pale and very still. She was bundled in warm blankets, and there were two braziers with smokeless fire on either side of her bed. There was a healer sitting in a chair next to her holding her hand. Enna's fingers were warmly wrapped and covered.

Harry sat silent and invisible in a chair on the other side, looking at her face. After a while the healer tucked Enna's hand back under the blankets and disappeared into a side room.

After she was gone, Harry made himself visible and put a hand lightly on Enna's shoulder. "Enna?" he whispered, but she didn't move. With a sigh Harry took out her hand and sat for a few minutes holding it himself. He couldn't heal her any, but it made him feel better.

"The healer left because I visit the same time every day," someone said from the doorway. "That's why there's no one with her."

Harry looked up at the door in surprise. Aeyris watched him with one hand casually on her hip. Her face looked conflicted.

"How do you get here so fast?" Harry asked. "I was just by the City and saw you there."

"Olen," Aeyris explained, and took a step closer. The last time they had spoken had been on good terms, and she knew most of the truth behind what had happened to Enna, but something about Harry being next to her daughter still made her uncomfortable.

"I got Vosenn to tell me about your... goddess." Aeyris said finally. "She recognized the fiery one, and eventually she told me what she knew about her."

"Luscious," Harry said quietly. So that's what was bothering her. He got up and joined her by the door. "I assure you, Aeyris, I am completely devoted to Enna. What happened between Luscious and me was out of my control. She's the Goddess of Desire. She has ways of getting what she wants."

"Are you saying she raped you?" Aeyris asked, shocked.

Harry nodded, a little uncomfortable. Am I being honest when I say there's nothing between Lush and I? Even now?

"Is something wrong, Queen Aeyris?" Olen appeared in the doorway, having heard her voice rise. He looked at Harry in surprise. "Wild One!"

Harry smiled at him. He hadn't heard that nickname in a while. "Hello Olen."

Olen stepped into the room, eyes shining in awe as he looked at Harry. He was still impressed by Harry's appearance in the tower an hour earlier, and unlike Aeyris, he knew that secretly the Portal Guide God and Harry were the same person.

There was an icy tingle on Harry's skin and a brief pressure on his temples, and Harry and Olen looked at each other, alarmed. A portal had opened nearby. But that's impossible... isn't it?

"Who are you?!" Olen demanded. Harry and Aeyris quickly looked toward the bed.

Etilon sat casually on the side of the bed, looking smug.

"You see him?" Harry asked the others, surprised, and Aeyris shot him a brief confused look and nodded. They shouldn't see him, he's dead...

"Your girl, Harry?" Etilon asked. He reached to touch her face but Harry ported next to him, gripping his wrist and stopping him.

"If you want a fight, you have it," Harry told him. "You're the one who's been running, not me. Leave her out of this."

There was a flicker of hate in Etilon's eyes, but he withdrew his hand, stepping back from the bed.

"Why can they see you?" Harry demanded.

"Intuition reformed my body," Etilon said, smirking. "And I'm still under her protection, so none of that zappy lighting you're so fond of using will work on me."

"A straight fight, then."

"Intuition will reward me for finally getting rid of you."

"Don't be so sure."

"Harry, who is this?" Aeyris asked. "Why is it he can port in the Pit like... you?"

"This is the Portal Guide willingly working for Intuition," Harry told her, not looking away from Etilon. Harry didn't trust him in the same room as Enna.

"Oh," Aeyris said icily. "Stay away from my dau—"

Etilon ignored her, his fist suddenly flying towards Harry's face. Harry was expecting it and he caught Etilon's arm, immediately porting both of them to the main shaft of the Pit.

Etilon began viciously clawing at Harry's face, leaving trails deep scratches that burned like fire. Harry threw him off and immediately flew upward, determined to get him out of the close confines of the Pit, and away from civilians. The Pit was dangerous; if anyone was injured they could easily fall to their deaths on the stone ground below.

They sped up the rock chimney, gaining speed and displacing huge amounts of air with their giant wingspans, creating a whirlwind that threw other Silents against the walls. There were screams of warning, and all of a sudden an ear splitting chiming sound filled the Pit. It echoed around them and immediately the Pit was empty of all other Silents.

Aeyris must have set off some kind of warning alarm, Harry thought.

Etilon finally caught up and grabbed at Harry, getting his foot. Harry kicked him with the other leg, but was momentarily slowed down and now they were almost face to face. They began trading blows, still moving upward.

The rim of the Pit was a black hole edged with light, a far off circle like a solar eclipse in a dark sky. They rose up through it, and the sky opened above Harry. The stars were twinkling and the faint glow of the sun rested on the horizon on all sides. Harry allowed himself a small victorious grin for moving the fight out of the Pit; Etilon returned with a victorious grin of his own. With his hands on Harry's shoulders he swung himself up and delivered a devastating blow to the upper joint of Harry's left wing. There was a sickening crack.

"Let's see how you like falling to your death," Etilon said.

Harry began to fall, but grabbed Etilon by the leg, pulling him down. "I didn't mean for you to fall, Etilon, you broke your own wing," Harry explained.

Etilon tried to stay aloft, kicking his leg, but Harry hung on determinedly. They began to sink.

"You still let me fall," Etilon said, "Did you know how terrifying that was? I didn't know Intuition was watching; I didn't know she would save me at the last moment. No one will be there to save you, Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes at Etilon's melodrama, and ported to the porting point. Only he didn't. Something kept him from porting.

The Pit swallowed them back up like the mouth of a giant beast and they were plunged into darkness, falling faster now. Harry's stomach sank as he realized if he didn't figure out what was keeping him from porting, he would eventually hit the bottom. He wasn't sure he would survive the collision, and he was completely positive it would hurt either way.

"Why can't I port?" he demanded Etilon loudly over the whistling of air around them. "The porting restriction in the Pit has never applied to me before, or in the Mermaid Grotto."

"That's because the restriction in the Pit was laid by your Grandfather, and the one in the Grotto was laid by your Grandmother, and their decrees don't apply to anyone with their power signature, like you. Intuition has laid a porting restriction around you specifically, so you can't escape it." Etilon smiled smugly, trying to shake Harry off while he spoke.

What Etilon said must be true, because the one time Harry hadn't been able to port was through the barrier around Voldemort, and that had been Intuition's doing. Harry looked at Etilon carefully, understanding. "You can't port as long as I'm holding on to you," he said, identifying a touch of panic in Etilon's eyes.

Etilon didn't respond, and Harry smiled widely.

"Well at least if I'm going down, you're coming with me," Harry said with satisfaction as he hung on.

Etilon stopped trying to fly and kept striking Harry in the side of the head, but was unable to shake him.

"Let go!" Etilon insisted.

"I fall, you fall!" Harry said cheerfully. They were now falling so fast, his eyes were drying out and he blinked furiously.

"I can't carry you!"

"I know!"

They passed the ledge to the Queen's Hall, where two figures stood and saw them pass. One was dark like a Portal Guide and the other was golden. Harry realized with dread that they were over halfway down the Pit.

Etilon's struggles became frantic, thrashing violently and striking out at Harry. Harry held on determinedly, returning Etilon's blows. His wing was a sharp pain, his lip was bleeding and he knew his face was bruised and gouged but the worst was yet to come.

The bottom of the Pit was visible now.

"Intuition!" Etilon called. "Please!"

White light gathered around Etilon and Harry felt Etilon jerk in his hands, an insistent pulling.

"No way," Harry said, gripping him tighter, and Etilon went nowhere. The glow faded.

"No!" Etilon cried desperately.

The space between them and the stone below dwindled quickly. In the last few seconds it seemed they were falling faster, and the moments flew away until there were none left.

In the last moment, Harry threw Etilon underneath him to soften his own fall. There was a crunching sound, and then IMPACT.

The world became gray and turned inward, rushing in to collapse on itself and crush Harry on the inside like a black hole. Every bone in his body was crushed; his skull was surely in several pieces and he

couldn't feel his legs or move even a single finger. Then the pain came and gray became black.

For several moments, Harry was nowhere, and then the blurriness began to withdraw. Deep inside his body something twitched insistently.

There were people standing over him, distressed.

"Oh Dark Eyes, Dark Eyes, Dark Eyes..." Aeyris was saying. She sounded nearly hysterical, and she let out a deep sob. Harry was incredulous. "Look at him. Enna will... she'll never..."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Olen said casually, and lightly touched Harry's shoulder.

"FINE?" Aeyris stopped crying, and yelled, "Oh you think he'll be fine?! He is everything but fine! Look, he's... shattered!"

"We'll see," Olen said. "Look!"

Harry instinctively obeyed, opening one eye. Etilon, who was partially wedged beneath Harry's legs, was fading away leaving nothing but his clothes and boots.

"He died," Olen pointed out unnecessarily.

"How could this have happened?" Aeyris was saying, not caring in the slightest about Etilon. There was a moment of shocked silence, and then she said, "Oh!"

A hand ran through Harry's hair. "Oh Harry!" Luscious was there. "I was watching but I didn't know what to do. Are you alright?" she asked fretfully.

"Is he alright?" Aeyris repeated in disbelief.

Warmth spread through Harry's body, and he could feel himself start glowing. His bones started pulling themselves together, causing sharp jabs of pain. His body began to knit itself back into one piece.

Harry could feel the pieces of his skull moving, and it was extremely unsettling. His spine fused back together and suddenly he could feel his legs again. He convulsively jerked, and then pulled his legs underneath himself and sat up.

Harry looked at Luscious dizzily. "I'm sure I'll be fine in a few moments," he assured her. Somewhere nearby, Aeyris sat down abruptly.

"You left the throne?" Harry asked Luscious. She nodded. "You should go back."

"Are you sure you're fine?" she asked.

He nodded. "Go. They need you more than I do."

Luscious leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. "Don't scare me like that," she scolded, and disappeared.

Harry's vision steadied and he got to his feet, letting his blue glow sink back into his skin and disappear.

Olen smiled cheerfully. "I'm glad you're okay. I did tell you, Aeyris."

Harry looked to Aeyris, where she sat gracelessly on the hard dirty ground, blinking at him.

"Well," Harry said finally. "I killed Etilon again."

She stared. Her tears had dried on her face.

"Are you going to say anything?" he asked her.

"You're..." Aeyris said in a raspy voice, "...him." She shook her head, "The Portal Guide God. A GOD."

Harry nodded.

"Does Enna know?"

"Yes," Harry said. He let Aeyris have a few more moments to absorb this new information, waiting patiently.

"This explains a lot," Aeyris said finally. "But... how... why... I don't understand."

"I'll explain it to you," Harry said and offered her his hand. She stared at it in amazement and finally took it and let him pull her to her feet. "I must say, it's nice to know you care so much about me, after all."

She looked at him quizzically. "Of course I care if you die. Especially if I have to watch and then stand over your broken body."

"Then I've grown on you?" Harry asked teasingly.

Aeyris shook her head and laughed. "Well this changes things, that's for sure." She looked at Olen. "Did you know?"

Olen nodded. "All of the Portal Guides know."

Harry winced. "Yeah, that was an accident. I'm sure to still get in trouble for that one."

"Why didn't you port away while you were falling?" Olen asked him.

"Intuition kept me from porting," Harry explained. "It worked, but she couldn't pull Etilon away from me either."

"Can you port now?"

Harry tried, and managed to port a few feet away. He walked back. "She must have only been able to hold me for a short time. Come, let's go." He took Olen and Aeyris by the hands and ported them back to Enna's room.

Later that same day the three of them were back at City Hall.

Aeyris tripped on one of the steps up to the front door, and Harry looked at her in surprise. He'd never seen Aeyris trip before.

"Dark Eyes!" she swore, "I just realized you're the grandson of Dark Eyes!" She gaped at him in awe. Being a god was one thing, being directly related to her God was another thing entirely.

"Shh," Harry said with a frown. "Remember you can't say anything, or tell anyone."

Aeyris nodded absent-mindedly. "I understand."

They stepped through the front door into the large lobby and Harry was surprised to find it crowded with people. Ron, The Chief King, Lord Duran and Iz were not there, but other than them all of the usual people from the Tower were in the midst of putting on coats and gathering weapons. The Chief King's sister, Lords Marr and Laike, Aadon, Hermione, Dumbledore, Professors McGonagall and Snape, two Silent Captains, The Spring-Bringer, Magorian and the Centaur Elders were all present. Lord Marr was pulling on some boots, and they were all buzzing with conversation. Aadon saw the three of them enter and nodded acknowledgment, and then Hermione saw Harry.

"Harry!" she cried. "We haven't seen you in days! Come over and hear the news. Look, Dumbledore is here now."

Harry walked over to where Hermione was standing with Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, and Severus Snape. There was an awkward moment. Harry slowly looked his former Hogwarts professors and headmaster in the face, and they looked with obvious discomfort at his wings.

"Harry..." McGonagall said finally. "Sorry. It was just so hard to believe at first, that you were... you know... I guess I had almost convinced myself it wasn't true."

"Yet here you are," Dumbledore said, and smiled optimistically. "I, myself and grateful you are who and what you are. No doubt it had a part in your survival."

Snape didn't say anything, but worked his jaw.

"So you're a Silent," McGonagall said brightly, realizing she was being negative. "Everyone has told us about your accomplishments here, and we met your family."

Aeyris walked passed just then. "He's dating my daughter," she interrupted, and sent Harry a look of complete awe and wonder. Her expression was so intense that the humans were taken aback, and Hermione looked completely confused.

"Oh right. Enna, the Princess," McGonagall said.

"How is Enna today?" Hermione asked Aeyris, still looking perplexed.

Aeyris' expression turned somber. "Same as always."

"What happened to Enna?" Dumbledore asked with concern.

"Shes, er... sick," Hermione said tactfully, glancing at Harry.

"Oh," Dumbledore seemed to be waiting for more elaboration, so Hermione quickly changed the subject.

"The Portal Guide God was here earlier," she told Harry, "Did Aeyris tell you what he said?"

Harry said "Yes," at the same time that Aeyris said "No."

"You told me about it at the Pit, remember?" Harry prompted Aeyris.

"Oh yes!" Aeyris said cooperatively, with slightly too much enthusiasm. Then she quickly withdrew, to Harry's relief.

"So where is everybody going?" Harry asked. "Has something happened?"

"This morning, we noticed a large battle up the coast," Hermione said. "So far, all the fights have been fairly small and spread out, between small groups of individuals," she explained to Dumbledore and the others. "But this one keeps growing bigger. At first the enemy was pinned against the water, but then more Death Eaters came to their

rescue. So we sent more fighters, and more of the enemy came. According to the scouts, there are no more Ice Lizards or Death Eaters anywhere in God's Landing. They've all gone to the coast to make a final stand. They've been pushing towards the City, fighting through our people. They're almost here. Everyone who can is going down to defend the City."

Harry was astonished. "We're actually... winning?"

Hermione flashed a white smile. "It's definitely a possibility."

"How are things elsewhere on Origin?" Harry inquired. He had watched over Origin from Sky's End and seen fighting everywhere, but it was hard to grasp the grand scheme of things through the glimpses he had seen.

"Reports of many casualties," Hermione said sadly, "But also good news. Most places only had Ice Lizards to deal with, and we had Voldemort and the Death Eaters too."

"That makes sense," Harry said. "Intuition had a whole planet of Ice Lizards. I know; I saw it. But there's only a limited amount of Death Eaters, so there's enough Ice Lizards to plague all of Origin, and only enough Death Eaters for here. God's Landing is where all the Race Leaders are right now. Even if they're only symbolic leaders, like the Spring-Bringer, it would still send the people of Origin into panic if they died."

"Easier for them to conquer," Hermione agreed.

"So have they asked for surrender?" Snape asked.

Hermione shook her head. "They demand nothing. They just attack."

Harry frowned. "That is strange, isn't it?" But then again, nothing about this has made sense since the very beginning.

"It's here!" Someone said, breathlessly, from the door. "We must defend the City!"

"Time to go," Lord Laike said loudly.

City Hall emptied. Outside even the old men and women and the mothers leaving behind their young ones crowded the walkways. They went down through the stone streets and alleyways of the City, trickling like sand down to their warriors fighting for their lives on the beach. It was hard to see over their heads and the Silents impatiently took to the sky.

Harry found himself next to Aeyris, who looked at him with a slightly dazed expression.

"Aeyris!" he yelled, impatient. "Wake up! We need to fight now! Your people need you!"

She blinked. "Yes of course." Visibly, she pulled herself together. "Are you accusing me of neglecting responsibilities?"

"Yes."

Her eyes narrowed. "How dare you?! Well... you dare, I suppose."

"Just forget about what you found out today," Harry said. "I'm still Harry, same as I've always been."

"Exactly the same," Aeyris said with heavy sarcasm, and flew away in disgust. Harry shrugged.

He flew over the edge of the bluffs, and was stunned by what he saw. The battle had swelled to massive proportions and there were bodies scattered back down the beach as far as he could see. A core group of Ice Lizards and Death Eaters were fighting their way forward, leaving blood and body parts in their wake.

There were warriors from every race. Bloodbeasts, Silents, Humans and Centaurs fought side by side. The mermaids fought from the water's edge, throwing poisoned spears, and here and there a Vineadryad slipped between the ranks. The Vineadryads were all female with flowering vines, and Harry picked up bits of song. Around

them, trees sprung up and wrapped themselves around Ice Lizards and held them in place while they were killed.

Harry made sure he could spot Ron, still alive, as well as Draco and Vosenn, right near the center. Gray and Jon were near the base of the bluffs with Ren, who was riding on the back of Bumbles with the Wanderer. Aeyris flew down and joined Iz and Madalena, who were surrounded by scores of Silents.

Harry swooped down and grabbed a Ice Lizard off the ground. It thrashed and dug his claws into him as he carried it up into the sky. Looking into his face, Harry spit a fireball of Wrath's flame that engulfed it and burned it alive. It charred the front of Harry's shirt but his hands were unscathed. Faces turned up toward him, surprised by the explosion. They cheered when they saw his huge black wings, the presence of an undefeatable Portal Guide giving them hope.

Olen and Aadon came to his side, Aadon looking grim and determined and Olen grinning from ear to ear.

Harry blew fire down on the heads of the Death Eaters, lighting several of them on fire. They managed to put the fires out, and threw a torrent of curses in his direction. The curses hit him, lighting him up for a brief moment before sliding off ineffectually. Harry grinned down.

Unfortunately because of the density of the crowd he couldn't keep up his aerial attacks without hurting his own people, and soon all of the Silents were fighting on the ground with the others.

Three more dead Ice Lizards and some time later, Harry took a step back to assess the situation.

Everywhere Harry looked he saw the bodies of dead Ice Lizards, but he couldn't spot a single live one. The last Death Eaters were encapsulated in the center of the crowd, fighting back to back. In the center the Leader's hood fell back, and he wore no mask. It was Voldemort himself.

The area around him glowed green as he cast Avada Kedavra in all directions, and then stepped over the bodies. His expression didn't

recognize defeat, convinced the goddess on his side and his own incredible powers would prove victorious.

Someone fought their way into this inner circle. It was Ron, with a wand in one hand and a strange green sword in the other. He came up behind Voldemort, who suddenly realized no one was defending his back and turned around. Ron was already casting a spell, and a moment later his green sword came slicing through the air.

Voldemort's head tumbled into the sand, and his body followed a moment later.

The Death Eaters were in shock, staring in disbelief at the body of their fallen leader, the one who was supposed to be undying and undefeatable. They fought feebly, but they had lost all hope of getting out alive. They were cut down moments later.

The huge army was in the grip of battle fury and it took them a couple moments to realize that the enemy was gone. They had won.

They yelled as one, screaming and cheering and jumping and throwing down their weapons to hug each other and splash in the water. Beside Harry, Hermione was out of her head in excitement, screaming Ron's name and jumping up and down like a maniac. Only Harry was tense, looking around for something the mortals might not be able to see.

The cheering stopped, swallowed by dread.

Intuition stood in the air above the beach, both beautiful and terrible. Her white hair whipped about in an angry wind and she bared her teeth at them. "I see I must do everything myself!" she shrieked in a voice that brought them all to their knees in pain. "This changes nothing!"

Harry stared, frozen by the abruptness of her appearance.

She floated backwards until she stood on a low cliff above them. "Prepare to die!" she hissed. There were screams of terror from the beach below. Some people tried to run, but most stared at her in

horrified fascination. She gripped the stone cliff with her fingers and appeared to shake it. Ripples spread through the stone, like an earthquake but also much like a sheet in the wind or churning water. The ground buckled beneath the mortals, pulling them down or tossing them violently in the air. Boulders crumbled from the edge of the cliff and rained down upon them, crushing and smashing.

The Silents took to the air, and Intuition let go. In one horrifying moment, Harry saw the cliff folded over Jon, collapsing and taking him from sight.

Harry screamed and found himself on a bare piece of sand, glowing bright blue-violet and wearing his cloak and hood. "Stop!" he yelled, but the ground kept moving. Kneeling, Harry dug his hands into the sand and commanded it to be still. Slowly the earthquake came to a halt, the ground trembling until it was finally still.

At the same moment, the sun went out. For a few moments they were in completely darkness. On the cliff, Intuition glowed an intense white, and Harry's blue glow reflected on the water and on the faces of the mortals around him.

Then there was a globe of light hovering above them; a mage had created a miniature sun above the beach. Everyone was looking at Harry with terror and hope, but he didn't know what to do.

Where is Luscious? Harry wondered. She's not on her throne, and she's not here. So where is she?

Intuition tried to shake the ground again, and Harry quickly stopped it. The ground quivered as they both forced their conflicting wills upon it. A huge boulder landed right next to him, shattering. Intuition had thrown it at him.

"You think you can stand up to me, Godling?" Intuition said with a fierce laugh. "Then fight me!"

"Not here," Harry gasped desperately.

Her smile was calculating. "Very well," she said. Instantaneously she stood before him. Next to her, a hole split into the air itself, and blindingly bright light shone out of it. She gestured to it invitingly.

Harry hesitated suspiciously, and Intuition stepped through the gap, disappearing. Harry had no choice but the follow. He stepped into the bright light and the doorway showing a piece of the beach shrank and closed behind him.

They stood in a small space. Pressure came from all sides, and Harry felt as if he were surrounded by a suffocating presence. The air itself was thick and hard to force into his lungs, so he immediately gave up, relying on his Portal Guide tolerance of oxygen deprivation. The heat burned his skin and it hurt to look into the bright piercing light assaulting his eyes. The sudden difference between the cool seashore and this terrible place was shocking, and Harry staggered, finding his balance and standing straight and tall. Using the same method as for the Void, he strengthened the glow that surrounded him, and it stayed some of the heat and pressure. Finally his eye's adjusted and he could see the Goddess standing before him, looking at him intently.

"Welcome to Hell," Intuition said, her expression serious.

## Chapter Fifty: Apocalypse Duel

On the beach, the portal closed, leaving thousands of mortals to wait patiently for their fate to be decided for them. Whether they lived or died depended on the young portal guide and his ability to defend them against an entity that had existed since the beginning of existence itself.

The small sun dimmed slightly as the mage powering it weakened. Some people ran, not wanting to be there when the gods and their terrible earth-shaking powers returned. Most stayed to pray together, and pled to the gods for their lives.

“Welcome to Hell...” She had said, and Harry didn’t understand. He felt naked and powerless before her intent gaze, and the dark expectations that lurked there.

The background was like her, white and blank, and like the glacier of the Ice Lizard planet she blended into it.

“So, what’s your move, Grandson of Dark Eyes?” Intuition asked, mouth twisting into a sly smile. “Will you strike against me, or...”

“Why?” Harry implored. “I want to know why you are doing this!”

She seemed pleased. “Very well,” She reached out her white, shining hand, in what anyone else would be a gesture of compassion. Harry regarded it suspiciously.

“Take it, if you wish to learn,” she said simply.

Harry wasn’t so easily convinced. “You have done everything in your power to destroy the people of Origin,” Harry stated. “You and I are enemies.”

Intuition left her hand where it was, casually held out in front of her. She looked at him thoughtfully, before replying, “I want a witness... someone who understands my side. If I ever had an equal, they are elsewhere; but you are at least one of my kind and you have fought quite impressively. I chose you.”

The suspense and intense curiosity mounted within him, until Harry impulsively reached out and grasped Intuition's hand.

It was like cold marble. There was a resistance when their glowing auras met and intertwined. Harry gasped as her energy hit him like a jolt of electricity, the point of contact between them tingling as if they clasped a handful of freeze moss between their palms.

Her eyes met his, blank as the Void and as white as clouds, and on their surface images played. He was drawn into them, until he was within them, and he knew Intuition's mind.

This place is only the physical Hell; she whispered without words, I carry the true Hell within myself.

There was a tearing, numbing pain, and a howling like the Void. Following the howling swept in the desperate pleas of hundreds of whispering voices, getting louder and louder until Harry identified the howling sound he was hearing: Grief.

They were like an army of insects, chittering frenetically as they crawled through his mind, biting and driving him to madness. Harry wanted to claw at his head, blocking his ears from their entry and shake them off, but they were manifestations of spirit.

In this madness, Harry was assaulted by the images that played in front of him. He was seeing the world from Intuition's eyes, but the memories seemed to be playing all at once, in layers over another and surrounding him from all directions.

He saw the Gods surveying their new creations from the skies above, and he felt Intuition's skepticism, her hesitance. She created no species, and waited to see what befell of her brothers and sisters. She expected them to fail, but she felt regret for them and their enthusiasm. Why create inferior beings, She wondered. We have perfection in our grasp, and yet we move backwards? She didn't find the exploits of mortals as amusing, as the others did.

Then it began. As expected, the mortals began dying.

She was Intuition, Goddess of Mystery.

Dying, the great Mystery... became her new domain.

The other Gods heard the voices of their living, but once dead mortals passed out of their hold and into Intuition's hands. Not all of them, of course. Those that died peacefully, with closure, had no reason to linger. The others, the ones not ready to pass on, bit into her with greedy teeth and held on.

They want life, Intuition explained. They want to be back with their loved ones. I can't give them life, they are mortals and it is their nature to pass into nonexistence after a certain time. Maybe exceptions can be made by the Gods, for some time, but not for all and not forever! Their loved ones, I can give them. When they are all reunited in death, they will have no reason to torment me. They will be at peace and be gone.

Harry understood. Intuition hadn't needed to create a people, because her people were the dead. And not all the dead; the peaceful dead moved on immediately into nonexistence. Only the angry, bewildered, conflicted dead, who instead of praying to her screamed their misery. Her plan to get them out of her head was to kill all mortals, and anything else she had ever said was a lie. She didn't want to take over, Etilon wouldn't be made a God, and Voldemort would never have been given the eternal life she had promised him.

Doesn't killing them in such violence give them unrest? They will not move on easily, He commented. They seemed to be communicating much in the same way Harry communicated with Enna, but instead of a bond of love they were bonded through the connection of their hands and the intersection of their auras. For a moment it bothered him, and then Harry was overcome with sympathy, as he felt speared by her pain.

It will be difficult, she allowed, but then it will be OVER. Her relief washed over them like a cool wave, one that was immediately replaced by chittering and biting teeth.

Why did you not go to the others? Harry asked. Your brothers and sisters?

I know them, perhaps better than they know themselves. They would not be persuaded to destroy the beings they hold as dear as children. Once I approached them, I would not have been able to enable this plan in the manner that I have. They are ignorant to my motive, so they will not expect me to do this. When they come back, it will be too late. Origin will be barren and I will have to face their anger. But it will be worth it.

I'm sorry Harry, I have compassion for you. I have moments of compassion for all of them, Luscious who I almost destroyed and the mortals I would have exterminated. But it doesn't matter! There is no choice. It must end! Her eyes for once were filled with something other than Void, filled with wild passion and necessity. Now you will stand out of my way!

I can't! Harry responded. I understand, I do, but there just has to be another way.

Your influence in the matter has been taken from you, she informed him.

Harry tried to make sense of this statement. What does that mean? He was filled with foreboding.

She showed him what he meant. Harry found himself looking at his own body from the outside. His body was standing unnaturally still, with his eyes closed. Instead of trying to understand by himself, Harry reached into Intuition's mind for the answer.

She had tricked him. She had used his curiosity to her advantage, luring him outside of his own body into her own mind to find the answer and he was now outside and separate. It was similar to what she had done to Alexander, removing his soul and keeping the body for her use.

Harry left Intuition's mind, but he was no more than a presence, no physical manifestation. He pushed against his body, trying to regain

control of it, but something held him at bay. Suddenly, Harry's body moved and his green eyes opened, looking around Hell with a certain wonder.

Harry and Intuition were no longer touching, and so she used her voice. "You are now among the number of many spirits that are bound to this place, Harry, unable to leave. You may howl all you want, but as you know it's unlikely I will hear your words. And by leaving your body, you opened it to the others. As I expected one of them has taken control." Now addressing Harry's body, she said, "Hear me, spirit! If you wish you keep this mortal form, you will obey me."

But I am a God, not a mortal spirit! Harry protested in confusion.

"Certainly you are a God," Intuition said, "And not a weak one, either, besides your mortal father and upbringing. But you have never been in a pure, raw form as you are now. It will take you some time to become accustomed to it, and take you even longer to escape this place. This is the center of the Void, very much like the eye of a storm. Every single wind and power that is the Void is pushing towards this place. Every mortal soul that doesn't fade or get stuck in the atmosphere of its home world ends up here."

"You no longer have a mortal body and magic to travel with," she explained, "And you will have some difficulty getting out, because the very essence of what we gods are made of is keeping you in. By the time you figure out how to escape, your worlds will be long gone. Enjoy your stay."

Harry raged at her in frustration, but there was no point; she probably couldn't hear him over the spirit voices assaulting her already.

"You," she told Harry's body. "Come along. Access his memories and learn how to port, we're going back to Origin." She disappeared.

NO! Harry yelled silently, grabbing at his body. There was a sudden tugging where his ethereal hand touched his physical self, and a moment later he found himself in the Void, struggling to hold on. The wind felt like it was ripping him apart, taking pieces of him, slowly

disintegrating him into dust like Lush. They passed through the atmosphere of Origin and it was a crushing pressure, sticky, as if it were trying to hold him. Then Harry was back on the bluffs by the City. Everything was just as they had left it, and all the mortals stared up at Intuition, horrified.

Harry felt like scattered pulp. What just happened?

Intuition smiled a thin smile. Harry's cousin Alexander suddenly stood next to her, expression blank, and Harry's possessed body stood next in line with a similar expression. Whatever gave Harry his god aura and abilities had left with Harry's soul, and his body was without glamour. He was simply Harry the Fraizhan, unrecognizable as the Portal Guide God.

"I have defeated your champion," Intuition projected in a voice heard down the beach, under the ocean surface, over the bluffs and all the way into the City. "The Portal Guide God is no more."

A cry of anguish echoed through the crowds, echoing off the cliffs and the water.

"SILENCE!" Intuition commanded. "I want to show you my toys." She looked at Harry's body and Alexander. "I understand you mortals hold great respect for the power of the Portal Guides, formerly known as the Cursed. Especially the one known as Harry Potter." She smiled slyly. "Harry Potter is a symbol of hope for you mortals, is he not? He was a symbol of hope on Earth, and then he was the savior of his people and a fighter for your cause." She gestured at Harry's body. "He is my creature, and obeys my commands. Now that I have destroyed your last defender, the young Portal Guide God, and taken over one of your heroes, see that this is futile. Take up your weapons and destroy yourselves."

There was complete nervous silence. Harry frantically tried to pull himself together, to give himself form. It wasn't working, but Intuition didn't seem to see him either. Harry suspected his essence was spread out thin, like a mist, and she didn't expect him to be there.

From the crowd, Aeyris and Dumbledore stepped forward, and Harry could see all the other familiar faces in the crowd looking at Intuition and Harry's body incredulously.

"Harry!" Aeyris called, "Is what she says true?" She looked at him pleadingly, confused.

"What has she done to you?" Dumbledore asked, sounding deeply disturbed.

"Very well. Take their weapons," Intuition murmured. Next to her Harry's powerful wings moved, and he swooped down on the crowd. Somebody threw up a quick defensive barrier, but it only delayed the spirit occupying Harry's body for a second. He ported beyond the barrier, landing in front of Aeyris and Dumbledore. Aeyris had a long sharp sword, and Dumbledore held his wand loosely in his hand. Harry took both easily; neither of them seemed to want to defend themselves against him.

Harry flew loyally back to Intuition's side, and a dark muttering spread through the people watching.

"Now," Intuition said loudly, "Face your death!"

She raised her arms, and several people screamed, but in that second, remarkably, the spirit in Harry's body took Aeyris' sword and swung it determinedly at Intuition's head. It cut into her neck and she shrieked in surprise and fury, turning her blank eyes on him and backing up. Her neck closed back up again bloodlessly.

"You think you can hurt me with a sword?!" she howled.

Inexplicably, Harry's body glanced at where his soul floated, as if it could see him, and sent him a meaningful look. Then it swung the sword again.

In that moment, Harry acted. He swept into Intuition's mind from behind, creeping past her defenses. He managed to steal several gobs of power and knowledge directly from her mind before she noticed he was there. He suffered the screaming voices for several

agonizing moments before she thrust him back out viciously. It was quiet relief.

Using the knowledge he had gained, Harry pulled his form together into what almost looked like a solid body, glowing, with slight translucence. He took the familiar god-form of the Portal Guide God, with the long cloak and hood, and flickering fire eyes.

"You!" she hissed. Harry's body tried to cast several spells on her with his casting stone. Strangely enough, they were spells Harry didn't even know. Intuition then sent a bolt of pure power at him, swatting him out of the air like a bug and sending him crunching into the side of a cliff. He tumbled down and lay still.

Harry's hands clenched seeing this. It was his own body, even if it was... occupied. Harry looked away, turning towards Intuition.

"You didn't destroy me," Harry said, "You merely tried to trap me. Well it didn't work."

The ground began shuddering again. Aadon ported loyally to Harry's side.

"Tell me what to do," Aadon asked quietly.

"The Portal Guide, Alexander," Harry said quickly, "She is controlling him. He will try to attack us, but he doesn't mean to. Keep him out of the fight and try not to hurt him."

Aadon ported directly in front of Alexander who mindlessly attacked him. Aadon warded him off, trying not to hurt him. Aadon's experience quickly won over Alexander's mindless obedience, and Aadon landed a solid blow on Alexander's temple. Alexander sat down harmlessly, not responding to Intuition's order to stand and attack.

Without hesitating, Intuition shot a blast of pure white hot light at Aadon. It hit him in the back, throwing him far through the air. The ancient Portal Guide landed like a broken puppet in a pool of blood and burnt clothing.

No.

Harry walked towards Intuition, gathering his fury, finally ready to face her. He glared into her face, vowing to repay her for every one of his friends who had died and every innocent life that had been lost.

They stood face to face, and Harry's hand flew out to grab her. She caught it and they stood, strangely holding hands. Inside, the battle raged on. Harry tried to enter her mind, only to find it blocked by powerful mental barriers. However, she had invited him into her mind once before and he had seen the inside of it twice; after a few moments he found himself sinking through the barriers and pressing deeper.

You want it? Intuition screamed, Then take it!!

The full force of her torment assaulted him, exploding against his senses and Harry screamed aloud. On the beach the mortals put their hands over their ears, faces grimacing in pain. Harry held on, feeling like a leaf fluttering on a tree, about to be ripped away by the wind.

The sharp needle-like pain in his head eased slightly, replaced by a soothing murmuring that slowly grew louder. It was calming and soft, nothing compared to the incessant howling of the unresolved dead. It managed to take the edge off and Harry stopped screaming and managed to pull himself together.

Harry looked out from Intuition's mind, through her eyes. The mortals had fallen to their knees, and they were praying. For him. Their voices were protecting him from the sound in Intuition's mind. Intuition realized it at the same moment he did.

"Stop doing that!" she yelled at them, jealously feeding her fury. "Stop doing that immediately!"

Some flinched, but most didn't move and they continued praying determinedly.

Intuition's mind stuck out and clashed against Harry's own, the direct confrontation he had been so terrified of. As one of the great gods, she was incomprehensibly powerful.

Harry was surprised to find his mind respond in equal measure. Supported by the praying voices, he held his ground. He realized Intuition's mind was faltering, undermined by so many years of pain and suffering. She couldn't destroy him. However she was still much more powerful than he, and he was unable to affect her either. They froze into place, straining.

Time passed in an eerie fashion, seconds blending into minutes, indistinguishable.

Harry's own thoughts ground to a halt.

There was complete silence.

The waves seemed to stop.

Was her will wavering?

Mindlessly he pushed.

Nothing breathed.

Time passed.

Quiet.

"Stop this at once!" A voice boomed, and their concentration broke. Exhausted, Harry and Intuition slumped against each other. They were barely able to stand and yet somehow held each other up. In Harry's ear, Intuition breathed a slow, deep sigh.

Dark Eyes was there. He stood on the waves, glowing dark blue, his aura like velvety steel. His black eyes were on Intuition accusingly.

Intuition collapsed, and Harry half caught her, then started to fall down himself. Arms came around him gently.

"I've got you," MindRuin said soothingly, holding him up. Wrath was there, taking Intuition from him and carrying her in his arms. Her eyes were closed.

Harry looked at MindRuin behind her veil and nodded thanks, standing up on his own. Only the three gods had come.

"Something terrible has happened today," Wrath murmured as he looked around at the thousands of mortals kneeling in the sand. They watched the gods, awestruck.

Harry was too weary to care how his grandfather came to be there. He was too tired to hold himself completely together, and his form fuzzed out a little around the edges as he floated toward the cliff. His semblance of a body was only there as long as he had the strength to will it there, and that was waning.

Harry stopped at Aadon, who was dead. Harry gently touched his friend's face in passing and moved on to the base of the bluffs, where his own body lay.

Dark Eyes was suddenly beside him.

"You need to leave this place immediately," Dark Eyes told him.  
"Come."

Dark Eyes picked up Harry's body, laid a hand on Harry's near insubstantial shoulder. Dark Eyes wasn't really there either, and could still touch him. Suddenly they were standing in the round room at Sky's End. Wrath had brought Intuition, and MindRuin held a blank faced Alexander gently by the hand.

Lush was sitting on the ground, leaning against the door to her mother's throne room. She leapt to her feet, eyes shining with excitement and relief. "You're alive!" she exclaimed joyfully, and came towards him. The last few steps to him she ran and threw her arms around him, which he accepted, but then suddenly her lips were on his. Harry instinctively responded, bringing his hands up behind

her back to pull her closer. Her tongue artfully darted into his mouth to touch his and the sensual kiss deepened.

Then Harry came to his senses and dropped his hands, trying to pull back away from her. He tried to disengage the kiss, but she leaned into him and ended it slowly.

Harry looked at her with his mouth hanging slightly open in surprise. Dark Eyes gave him a pointed look, and Harry turned his eyes determinedly down. He would resolve this later.

Dark Eyes laid Harry's body in the middle of the room. There were dark bruises forming on his face and a deep cut on his forehead, crossing over his lightning scar. Harry's grandfather held a hand above it and the cut healed, bruises fading. A moment later his eyes flickered open. The spirit in Harry's body looked around with surprising calm and acceptance, and Harry once again experienced the bizarre feeling of watching himself.

"Who are you?" Harry asked, not sure how to act. "You helped me fight against Intuition. Why?"

The spirit looked at Harry with deep feeling, as if drinking in the sight of him. "Harry... I'm your father."

They stared at him in shocked silence.

"Oh wow," MindRuin murmured.

"You're James, the mortal husband of my daughter Lily?" Dark Eyes confirmed.

The spirit, James, nodded. "You two are her real parents, aren't you? Certain things became clear to me after my death."

Harry didn't know what to say. He looked at his father in disbelief.

"Isn't this touching," Wrath muttered, "A little family reunion."

"You are just bitter because Intuition used you," MindRuin accused with slightly narrowed eyes.

Wrath didn't respond, looking down at the peacefully sleeping Intuition in his arms. His eyes glared daggers, but his he held her with surprising gentleness. This was the first time Harry had seen Wrath and Luscious side by side. The fierce muscled giant didn't seem like he could be remotely related to the small, soft-looking Lush. But their eyes were the same piercing blood-red.

"I..." Harry said finally. "Are you really my father?"

James nodded. He met Harry's eyes, looking somewhat uncomfortable, and then looked down at his feet. "Are you really Harry?"

"Of course," Harry said, with surprise. "You have my memories, you should know."

His father gave a small ironic laugh, and took a step forward, pulling Harry into a hug. Harry merely allowed it at first; barely substantial enough to feel the touch. Then sensed the truth; he was indeed meeting his father for the first time. Harry pulled himself together to return the hug properly.

"So what will we do with you?" Dark Eyes mused.

James faced him, squaring his shoulders fearlessly. "I will return my son's body to him and be pulled back into the Void, and eventually back in Hell."

"But you're an unresolved soul, you're waiting for your family," Harry protested, "But mother and I can never die. You will be waiting there forever. We have to do something!"

"The decision can't be made without Lily," Harry's Grandmother said firmly, crossing her arms.

"Of course," Dark Eyes agreed. "What about him?" He nodded at Alexander.

Alexander was looking at none of them, seemingly absorbed in the air in front of his face. His eyes were unfocused and his face was without expression.

"Will he get better?" Harry asked, concerned. "I would like to meet who he really is and get to know him."

"His soul wasn't destroyed, just pushed out," Dark Eyes said, "He lives so it's still tethered to his body. It will be hard to reintegrate the two. Fortunately, it can be done with time and attention."

James furrowed his brow. "What if I can help him?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked hopefully.

"His body is empty at the moment. But if I were to enter it, I could communicate with him; try to help Alexander regain control."

MindRuin nodded. "It could be done."

"In either case, Harry needs to retake his body immediately or risk losing his connection to it permanently. We cannot cast you back into the Void before Lily returns, and this is an empty vessel," Dark Eyes decided logically, "Do it."

James took Alexander by the hand, and then looked towards Harry, offering his other hand. Harry took it, and felt himself pulled through the hand and up his arm until he was completely inside.

James was still there. For a moment they overlapped, minds sharing the same space. Harry could feel in that instant exactly the kind of person his father was, as if he had known him his whole life.

Hello son.

Hello.

Then James' mind trickled away, and slowly awareness grew in Alexander's eyes.

"Hello, nephew," James said aloud. He seemed to turn inward for a few moments. "I feel Alexander here. I'm not sure if he can hear me yet."

"It may take time," MindRuin said.

Harry swayed slightly on his feet. Lush fitted herself under his arm and wrapped an arm around him in support.

"You should rest," Dark Eyes said.

Harry nodded agreeably, then changed his mind and shook his head. "Not before you tell me what happened. How did you get out of the Eye?"

Dark Eyes sighed. "Very well. Luscious?"

"I was watching the end of the war when Intuition showed up," Lush told him, "And I panicked. I ran out of the throne room, I was going to tell your Grandfather or something. I ran into my father. He had waited until the other gods were far into the Void before circling around and coming back here. He had no idea what was really going on, so I told him. Since Intuition is one of the Great Gods, a confrontation between the two of them would have been an equal fight. It would have destroyed much of Origin without resolving anything, so my father wanted to get Dark Eyes out of the Eye. It takes two of the Great Gods to imprison or release a god out of the Eye; I wasn't able to help. Fortunately, your Grandmother showed up then."

"I had gone along with Aya because that's what was expected of me," MindRuin said. "While I believed Dark Eyes could well have been behind some mischief, I didn't think it was right to lock him up. I came back. I didn't know what I expected to do, since I couldn't free him myself. Perhaps it was just to keep him company, but I'm glad I came."

"I'm glad as well." Harry smiled at her.

"We immediately went to find you," Dark Eyes concluded. "And you know the rest."

"Now it's time for you to sleep," MindRuin said firmly. "You need to regenerate the energy you lost. When you awake, everything will be set to rights."

There was a moment of deliberation, and they decided he should rest in his mother's room. Luscious walked him there, and MindRuin gently put the blankets over him. They left.

Lying in the canopy bed under the thick soft blankets, Harry felt safe, as he had not felt for many weeks. He experienced relief so deep it brought tears to his eyes and he drifted into a god's slumber filled with kindly mumbling voices.

(Author's Note: This chapter was posted so quickly because it's been mostly written for a while now; it's one of my favorite chapters. Eventually I will post the actual scene of the gods releasing Dark Eyes from the Eye. I can't yet because it would reveal something I'm saving for the sequel, so you're just going to have to read that, aren't you?)

I made a really hilarious typo. I typed "the true hell is carried within myself" as "the true hell is carried within myspace". Which is probably true.

Here's a question for you reviewers to answer, now that the Ice Lizard War is over, who will it be for Harry? Enna or Lush?)`

## Chapter Fifty-One: Hell Eyes

Harry woke up comfortable and warm. Slowly his mind surfaced from sleep, sliding through recent memories. He opened his eyes, rested and energized. His skin was glowing vibrantly.

Across the room Harry's mother was sitting at a table with Alexander, who was housing James' spirit. They sat without touching, but between them was an almost palpable connection as they gazed deep into each others eyes.

Lily glanced towards him. "Harry!" she got to her feet and Harry sat up. Lily looked taken aback for a moment. "I see," she murmured. She glanced back at James, who raised an eyebrow at her questioningly.

"Our son," Lily said with a shrug.

"Is something wrong?" Harry asked curiously.

Lily sat beside him and smoothed back his hair. "No, of course not. Everything's fine now. I'll explain later."

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"Two days," Lily said. "You needed to rest."

"When did you get back? Have all the gods returned?"

Lily nodded. "We were tracking Wrath and we had almost followed him back to Sky's End when we felt that our people were in distress. Normally we only hear them when we rest, but they were so loud we heard them while awake. We immediately rushed back, but everything had already been taken care of by then. We hadn't stop to rest during our search; we would have known something was wrong."

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" Harry asked.

"To protect you," Lily said. "Aya was insisting everybody join the search for Wrath. I was afraid if I said anything or drew attention to you, she would insist you come as well. You don't need to waste your mortal lifetime flying around the Void looking for old grouchy gods."

"I understand...what's going to happen to Intuition now?" Harry wanted to know.

"They put her on trial. They'll want to see you as soon as possible. You missed the first day, yesterday, when Luscious spoke."

"What did she say?" Harry repeated.

Lily shrugged "I only caught part of it. My parents, James and I were watching over you. Dark Eyes has already testified against her as well."

Harry got up, his black cloak falling fluidly around his body without a single wrinkle. He stretched his wings to wake up properly. "I want to see Grandfather," Harry told them.

James nodded. "Of course. We'll be together with you soon."

"We need to tell Aya you're awake," Lily said.

"Yes," James agreed. "She's been rather anxious to continue with the trial."

The three of them left through the lavender door. The round room was empty; the Eye was dark and blank. Lily smiled reassuringly at Harry, took James' hand and walked away. Harry went through the dark blue door, which opened. The door to Dark Eye's personal door opened immediately as well.

Dark Eyes sat on his armchair as if nothing had happened. A chair was waiting for Harry, as if the room was expecting him, which it probably was. Harry took a seat, familiar with the room and his grandfather. For a moment they sat in peace, no words were needed.

"Well done," Dark Eyes murmured. "Very well done, Harry."

"Well... I did make a few mistakes," Harry pointed out. "All of my people know who I am, and so does Aeyris."

Dark Eyes shrugged. "In the grand scheme of things, that's a minor detail. You'll have to face the Gods for it, but I will speak on your behalf."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"I could use the Eye for its normal capacity while inside, so I saw most things," Dark Eyes told him. "The only place I couldn't follow was into Intuition's mind, which you know better than anyone, now. I don't know what you experienced there."

Harry shuddered slightly. "She was in a lot of... pain."

"Pain like that changes you," Dark Eyes agreed. "It changed Intuition from our eccentric little sister into a violent madwoman."

"Will she be... punished?" Harry wasn't sure how to feel about Intuition. He wanted to make sure that she could never hurt anyone ever again. He still ached for Aadon and Jon. However, he had a personal kind of sympathy for her. What can they do to punish her after the hell she's been living with since Origin was created?

"The Gods have their own kind of justice, especially among our own people," Dark Eyes said vaguely.

"You mean you don't know," Harry said teasingly, and Dark Eyes smiled very slightly.

"Perhaps," Dark Eyes said. He leaned on one elbow and looked at Harry thoughtfully. "It's changed you too, you know."

"What has?"

"Your fight with Intuition. You shouldn't have been able to hold out against her, but you proved to be remarkably strong and she was weakened," Dark Eyes explained, "Only the Great Gods have ever

been to that place in the middle of the Void that we call Hell. To us it appears empty and silent. You are the only one besides Intuition who was heard the voice of it, and experienced it fully. It could have driven you insane, or made you give up your will to live. You survived, but with a souvenir."

"What?" Harry asked uneasily.

Something rose up from the floor, a long thin piece of the stone floor itself that rose in a thin flat piece in front of Harry. It hardened and became shiny, and Harry found himself looking at his reflection.

His hair was messy as always, but almost hidden under his cloak. His wings were the usual dark shadow behind him. What had changed were his eyes. When in his god-form, they had always been lit with the telltale Portal Guide fire, the mark of his people. The quality of the fire had changed, becoming intense, raging like an inferno. They smoldered in his face, drawing his attention in deeper and deeper, hypnotic and disorienting. Harry found it hard to look into his own reflection, and turned to Dark Eyes in amazement.

Dark Eyes smiled at his expression. "Any god can change how they look and what they want to wear, but we all settle down into an appearance that is our true self. Some of us have distinguishing characteristics at all times, for instance your grandmother can change how she looks all she wants but she will still be too beautiful for mortals to look at. Experiences can change the shape and quality of your essence. Your eyes are now a feature you won't be able to hide, not while in your god form. They won't be visible on your mortal body, but if you show your true self to mortals you will have to be very careful. It may injure them to look into your eyes."

Harry met his reflection again, and once again his eyes burned intensely. He suddenly remembered the way his father had questioned his identity, and how his parents had reacted when he had woken up. It made sense, now that he could see himself.

"You looked like that after you and Intuition returned from Hell," Dark Eyes told him. "A few of the mortals saw you... some of them were blind for half a day. They call you Hell Eyes now."

Harry blinked with surprise. "I have a name?"

Dark Eyes nodded. "I hope you like it. It's really hard to change the minds of mortals once they make a decision."

"I guess I'll get used to it then." The mirror slid back down into the floor and Harry added, "It will take me longer to get used to that."

Dark Eyes shrugged. "You have eternity to do so." Harry had a difficult time wrapping his mind around this concept. "One more question persists, Harry."

"What?" Harry asked.

"When MindRuin, Wrath and I arrived on the beach, you were locked in direct confrontation with Intuition, and looked as if you had been for some time. You seemed almost braced against each other. It makes me wonder: if we hadn't interfered, who would have won?"

Harry mentally put himself back into that place, where nothing had existed besides Intuition and himself, and every piece of his essence had been straining against her. "I don't know," Harry contemplated. "She was so powerful, but so weary. In the last moment, it almost felt like..." She was faltering. "Maybe she didn't really want to win."

"Maybe you were overpowering her," Dark Eyes suggested. "I guess we'll never know."

There was a whispery chiming sound from the direction of the door.

"Someone here to see you," Dark Eyes said.

The door opened and Lush slid in, red eyes dancing as she looked at Harry appraisingly.

"Hello Hell Eyes!" she said brightly. Her multicolored hair floated over and around her shoulders.

"Hello," Harry said dryly. We still need to talk.

"I like the new look," she told him. "Sexy."

"You would think so," Harry retorted, amused. "You alright now?"

"I had a long sleep, like you," she said. "Come on, I want to show you something."

Harry got to his feet, and nodded to his grandfather in farewell.

"I'll see you at the conclusion of Intuition's trial," Dark Eyes said. The second chair slid into the ground and the door closed on Harry's Grandfather.

"What did you tell the Gods?" Harry asked as he and Lush stepped back into the round room.

"Everything," Lush said nervously, glancing at him momentarily with wide eyes.

"It will be fine," Harry assured her. Lush muttered something, looking down, and her hair drooped slightly. "What did you want to show me?" he prompted.

"Oh, you're going to be happy," Lush said, getting excited again. "Follow me." She went to the silver door beside her mothers, with a dark blue crescent moon on it. The door opened for her, and Harry followed them through. The door closed and Harry found himself in a remarkable place.

There was no chamber or hallway on the other side of the door; they were standing directly on a short dock made of old smooth wood. The dock was built in a vast dark lake, somehow familiar. He could see stars in the distance, and the endless sky above swirled with clouds.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, looking around with wonder.

"You'll see," Lush said with a small smile. Something inside Lush had eased, as if she was truly letting her guard down. Her shoulders were

relaxed, and she waited contently on the dock. “She always knows when someone is here.”

Harry decided to give her the benefit of the doubt and they stood in silence for several minutes.

Lush was excitedly looking out over the lake, but she noticed that Harry was impatient and turned to look at him searchingly. “What is it?”

“I don’t really know... where we stand,” Harry said hesitantly.

Lush raised an eyebrow.

Harry bit his tongue, flustered.

“Well?” she prompted.

“At first I hated you,” Harry explained, “Maybe, I don’t know. I hated what you did. But it almost seems like... that was a different person.”

“I’ve changed more since meeting you then I have in the length of many mortal lifetimes,” Lush agreed.

“It became clear that you weren’t an enemy. I definitely feel like we have become friends.”

Lush giggled. “I would hope so.”

“But then that kiss...”

Lush shrugged. “I was caught up in the moment. Think of it as a reminder of my feelings.”

“But—“

“Shhh!” Lush interrupted. “Look!” She nodded out over the dark lake. In the distance there was a small silvery light, like a star but larger.

Harry fell silent and watched with interest as the light grew brighter and brighter. Finally it was close enough that the shadows behind the light formed the shape of a boat, and the light was a lantern. A woman sat in the prow of the small boat, which moved silently across the water. She looked young, but her hair was silvery gray, and her simple satin dress was a luminous off-white.

The boat was swift and moments later it pulled up next to the dock.

"Niece," the woman said in a soft whispery voice, "I see you've brought your friend. You are unmistakable, Hell Eyes."

"Aunt Serenity," Lush greeted happily and stepped into the boat, where the two women embraced.

"This is the Skyboat," Harry realized suddenly. "Of course you are Serenity, Goddess of the Moon."

Serenity smiled mysteriously. "And so much more... do you know what the purpose of the moon is, young godling?"

Harry shook his head, and carefully stepped onto the small boat. Harry and Lush sat side by side on a bench, and the boat pulled away from the dock. Harry looked back curiously. There was a dock with a small platform, and much like the entrance to Sky's End there was a single standing door.

The stars and sky reflected off the dark water, an endless mirror that made it appear that they were floating through space without direction or anchor to reality. Harry found himself completely silent. The stillness of the beautiful place was a profound experience, he felt it moving through him and he became more and more peaceful. Lush swayed beside him as if she had no limbs, and he found himself moving with her.

"Where is this place?" Harry whispered.

"The place where the mortal world meets the Void," Serenity said. "I am the guardian of the barrier. I travel across it, feeding it my power

and keeping it strong. Without the barrier, all of the mortal worlds would be destroyed.”

“Why did we come here?”

“She summoned me when I woke up,” Lush told him.

“Why?”

“There,” Serenity said.

Harry peered into the darkness ahead. There was something in the water, drifting on the surface. They got closer and pulled up alongside, and Harry leaned over the edge of the boat in astonishment.

It was a person, eyes closed as if asleep, floating in suspension on the surface of the water.

“Hello Aadon,” Harry said.

Aadon’s eyes opened and he looked up at Harry with a small smile. All the color had gone out of him, even his skin was a silvery gray blue, but he glowed with a soft bright light.

“Harry,” Aadon said, with a little nod. “Somehow I’m not surprised to see you on the other side of death. Where am I?”

Harry looked at Serenity inquisitively. “He’s an unresolved soul?”

Serenity nodded. “The manner of his death, as well as the infant status of the society he built anchors his soul. Like all unresolved souls, he floated upward towards the Void. As you know, there they are inevitably drawn closer and closer until they are in the eye of the storm. But not all souls make it that far. There are some remarkable souls that do not make it through the barrier between the mortal world and the Void. They remain suspended there.” She smiled. “It is not uncommon. You know them as stars.” She looked up, and the others followed her gaze.

The swirling mists above parted, revealing a large floating orb in the distance. Harry recognized it immediately as Origin.

"From here," Serenity concluded, "He can watch over the planet below."

Harry tried to assimilate this new knowledge. "The stars are all unresolved souls?"

Serenity nodded. Harry looked at Aadon, who had propped himself up on his elbows to see them better. Aadon looked pleased.

"Not a bad fate," the old Portal Guide murmured.

"I thought you would like to know," Serenity said to Harry.

Harry nodded thanks.

"If you wish," she continued. "He could be moved to the Sky above Fraizha."

Harry looked to Aadon inquisitively.

Aadon nodded immediately. "I think I would like that."

"I do wish," Harry said to the Moon Goddess.

"Climb aboard, then," she said.

Aadon sat up on the water, which still supported him on the surface. Taking the hand Harry extended to him, he stepped onto the small boat, sitting across from Harry and Lush. The boat began to move again.

"Somehow I could see everything that happened after my death," Aadon told Harry. "There was a moment... everything stopped, and Origin disappeared. I was disoriented, but I felt myself rising. After a time, I suddenly stopped, and suddenly up was down and down was up. It seemed that I had been falling, not rising after all, and I landed

gently in this place. But I could see things... images... in the mists above."

"That is the way of the stars," Serenity said. "You can look upon the living."

Harry smiled and gripped Aadon's shoulder, glad his friend hadn't suffered like those in Hell.

"Look," Lush said, and the two portal guides obeyed. To the side a building was coming into view, built solidly in the middle of the water. Somehow it was very familiar.

Harry peered at it as they glided by. "It's Dark Eyes' room," he said with wonder. "It has to be."

It was an isolated octagonal building with glass sides, the base and roof made of dark gray stone. The windows reflected the faraway glowing stars, but within Harry could see a figure standing, watching them.

"Dark Eyes enjoys this place between," Serenity said. "He created his home here."

The shadowing figure raised a hand in farewell as they glided away. Harry could see the flicker of blue flames in the center of the room, but then the light flickered out. Dark Eyes must have left.

A moment later, the mists cleared slightly. Harry could see hovering faraway planets, and they passed several stars floating serenely on the waves. The Skyboat traveled far, until even the stars were dim and there were no planets to be seen nearby. In the far reaches of the surface of the Void they found a mountainous planet, filled with deep green valleys and icy peaks.

"Fraizha," Aadon whispered with reverence.

"Nice," Lush complimented, nudging him with her elbow.

Even Serenity smiled her mysterious smile. “Quite the achievement, young Hell Eyes.”

Harry grinned, trying to be modest. “Well,” he murmured.

Directly below the planet, they stopped.

“This is where I get off,” Aadon said. He and Harry clasped hands.

“You’ve done a great thing for our people,” Aadon said.

“So have you,” Harry countered. “They will remember what you taught them. They needed you, and you gave them the tools to survive and the direction that will hold them together.”

“It was history in the making,” Aadon nodded. “I waited thousands of years, and I didn’t even know what I was waiting for. I finally found it.”

“I’ll visit, if possible,” Harry glanced at Serenity, who nodded.

“Until then,” Aadon said in farewell, climbing carefully over the side of the boat and lying down, eyes on the planet above.

The Skyboat moved swiftly, and the three gods sat in silence as they moved through the smooth water.

After some time had passed and they were back at the dock, Harry and Lush carefully stepped out of the Skyboat and back onto the wooden planks.

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“Now that we’ve met,” Serenity said, “Feel free to visit sometime. I rarely leave this place, and I enjoy company... occasionally.”

The two young gods walked down the dock to the door as the Skyboat began to glide away.

“Is she really your aunt?” Harry asked Lush. “She seems nothing like your mother.”

"No," Lush said. "They were both created, not born, so they are not related. Your grandmother MindRuin had a hand in their creation, but my mother's main creator was Wrath, and Serenity's main creator was the Green Lady. They were created around the same time, and their purposes were in some ways aligned, so people called them the sisters of Light. I enjoyed Serenity's company and spent time with her when I was a child. It didn't affect my ego much, unfortunately. I always called her Aunt Serenity." She laughed. "You know what's funny? They've never even met. Serenity almost never leaves the Skyboat, and my mother can't enter this place."

Harry opened his mouth to say something in response, but just then the door opened in front of him and his words died.

The round room was filled with Gods, each standing in front of their own door. The Great Gods were seated on large heavy thrones, and all eyes were on Harry. They were almost accusing, and Harry had the overwhelming impression that he was late for something very important.

"Harry," The Hermit God said loudly, "It is time for you to testify."

"It is also the time for your Judgment," The Green Lady added.

"My judgment?" Harry repeated. His stomach was sinking and his mouth was dry.

"Yes," the towering Goddess confirmed. "Intuition will know her fate, and you and Wrath's daughter will be judged for the rules you have broken."

Harry glanced over at Lush. She looked back, eyes wide and frightened.

"Told you so," she murmured.

## Chapter 52: Reaping Punishment

Harry looked around the room doubtfully, eyes meeting those of his grandfather, who nodded, and Harry felt reassured. His parents were there too, standing by Lily's Lavender door.

"What can they do, really?" he murmured back.

"You have no idea," she said quietly. She glanced particularly fearfully at the Green Lady, whose green eyes and cool expression held no mercy. "Stand by the Eye," she whispered to Harry and then retreated to stand between Wrath and Radiance, whose bright glow made Harry's eyes twinge slightly.

Harry walked over to the dark blank Eye. He turned nervously to face the Green Lady, who seemed to be leading the proceedings. She was waiting expectantly.

"You may begin," she said with a touch of impatience.

Harry licked his dry lips. "Er... where?"

"Start at the beginning and tell us everything," she commanded.

Harry took a moment to collect his thoughts. He couldn't tell them about what had happened between him and Lush, that wasn't important to the trial and too private besides, even if it did have to do with the story.

"I first encountered Ice Lizards in the Pit," Harry said, "Before I ever came to Sky's End or knew anything about the Gods. I awoke in my bed to find somebody standing over me, and moments later I was attacked by an Ice Lizard."

There was movement beside him, and Harry turned to look. The air above the Eye had turned hazy, and there were images forming in the mist. There was a spark of light, Wrath's fire in the image, and Harry recognized what he saw. It was himself, a dark watching figure, and the attacking Ice Lizard. Harry was glad that everyone was

watching the image and not his face; because he blushed hotly as realized it was a good thing he didn't have to tell them about what Lush had done.

The images continued to unfold as Harry told about how Alexander had been taken and he had heard about the continuing Ice Lizard attacks.

He then skipped ahead to the attack on Enna, and how he had rescued her. A hazy image of Harry facing the Ice Lizard and taking Enna into his arms hung over the Eye.

Harry jumped forward in time, which required some explanation, and Harry told how it came to be that he and the other young Originians ended up hiding at Hogwarts. He explained who Lord Voldemort was, and how Harry's attempted attack was thwarted by an inexplicably impenetrable wall. The scene where the Otherworld Control Center was particularly interesting to watch; especially when everything erupted into chaos as the Ice Lizards attacked. Harry fell silent, intrigued, watching himself whirl through the air with a blur of black feathers, ruthlessly cutting them down and finally disappearing for a moment into the Void to return and shatter his enemies into little frozen pieces.

There was a murmur of appreciation from the audience, and Harry thought he heard Lush laugh curtly.

The scene stopped playing then, before Xaxx betrayed them, and Harry didn't elaborate. "After that I came to Sky's End, and I learned my mother was a goddess. I also met Etilon." Harry left out the circumstances surrounding his abrupt departure from his friends for Sky's End, catching Lush's eye. She didn't react. There was no scene accompanying his statement, but Etilon's face appeared briefly, fading away.

Harry skipped forward in time again, past his creation of Fraizha, to the time Lush had approached him and tried to tell him something important, but was unable to go through with it. Several of the Gods nodded, having already heard this from her point of view.

Finally, his story got to the heart of the matter. He told about Enna's abduction and Harry's conversation with Intuition on the Ice Lizard planet. Once he started, the images appeared. The Green Lady leaned forward, and the images suddenly brightened and clarified, accompanied by sound for the first time. Harry stopped talking and listened and watched along with the other gods who were peering in interest as Intuition incriminated herself through Harry's memories.

The Eye didn't seem to need Harry's prompting anymore; the story was unraveling directly out of Harry's mind into the air in front of them. Enna sacrificed herself to the Void so that others could be warned, and Harry met Lush as she revealed her knowledge of Intuition's deception. The images shook slightly with emotion when Harry discovered that the older Gods were gone and the two of them were all alone.

Harry bit the inside of his lip, embarrassed, when he carelessly revealed his identity to the Fraizhans. The Green Lady was not the only one who sent Harry a sharp, disapproving glance.

The war between the Ice Lizards, the Death Eaters and Origin's defenders seemed to move in fast forward, a blur of fighting. The sound disappeared along with the clarity of picture. Apparently the events among the mortals were of less importance and interest. Things slowed down when Harry found the almost unraveled, halfway disintegrated and hopeless Lush, who seemed to have resigned herself to death and nonexistence.

Her words echoed with significance through the room as she whispered in a raw voice, "Intuition... She didn't have to come. She'd been in my head before; she could get into it again... She took everything. My hope, my power... Let me die."

The mood became dark in the round room at Sky's End, as did the light in the room as godly auras flickered with emotion and anger. Harry's own flaming aura was like a well stoked furnace. Reliving everything like this was painful, even through the relief that it was all over.

The Gods sure have interesting ways of holding a trial, Harry thought to himself.

They continued to watch as Harry confronted Etilon again and reaffirmed his dominance over the Black Storm. When Etilon attacked Harry in the Pit and brought about his death, Harry watched in horrified fascination as the image of his own shattered body pulled itself back together and became whole and alive again. When Aeyris was told of Harry's demi-god status, the Green Lady rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Harry crossed his arms, annoyed. That time hadn't exactly been his fault. He felt a twinge of nervousness.

When Intuition once again appeared in Harry's memories, the room became so silent that the air itself seemed to hold still in anticipation. The only sounds were the quiet voices of the hazy image as Intuition explained her reasons behind her actions. Harry snuck a glance around; many of the gods looked astonished and appalled. The final events between Harry, Intuition and the mortals were shown in complete detail, except for the inner struggle between Harry and Intuition, which appeared as two of them standing together, their expressions of deep concentration and sometimes agony. Finally Dark Eyes, Wrath and MindRuin came to end the fight, and their faces faded from view as the air cleared. It seemed like hours had passed since the trial had started, Harry had relived so much in such a short amount of time.

The silence continued long after it was comfortable, and Harry curled his toes in frustration as he waited.

"Well," The Green Lady said finally. "That was most interesting." She looked at Lush. "Will you join Harry while we deliberate?"

Lush meekly joined Harry in the middle of the room, discretely taking his hand and squeezing it apprehensively. Harry let her.

There was a strange echoing sound in the air, almost like a bell, and Harry went deaf. He could see the Gods turning to one another and talking, but he couldn't hear what they were saying, and he couldn't

seem to focus on their mouths and expressions. Harry could tell from the perplexed look on Lush's face that she was experiencing the same thing, but she shrugged.

They waited for long moments as the Great Gods conferred. Other gods made comments at different times, but the Green Lady and Dark Eyes did most of the talking. Harry felt better knowing his grandfather was on his side.

This is ridiculous, Harry thought. I saved the world, and just because one powerful goddess has a temper and a set of rules I don't even know in full, I'm almost a criminal. What can they do to me, really? Haven't I made up for my mistakes?

What seemed like eons later, sound suddenly came back. The Green Lady cleared her throat and Harry looked at her expectantly.

"These are our conclusions," the imposing Goddess said, "Let's start with Wrath's daughter, Luscious." She folded her hands and looked at Lush with what Harry thought was almost compassion.

"You did disobey direct orders from one of the Great Gods during a time of need," she started, "But you had been tampered with by a deity that wasn't one of your parents in an inappropriate way. Normally I would want some kind of token punishment enforced, but since you were the victim and have already suffered more than you should, you are forgiven."

The tenseness in Lush's shoulders relaxed and her tight squeezing grip loosened. She let out a deep breath.

The victim? Harry wondered, giving her a quizzical look.

There was light applause from the watching minor gods, and then everyone once again lapsed into an expectant silence.

"Harry, grandson of Dark Eyes and MindRuin, you have created some serious problems," The Green Lady said in a reprimanding tone. "Not only did you knowingly break the cardinal rule of mortal gods, you did so in a spectacular fashion. Not only does one of the most

powerful mortal women know your true identity, but an entire race!" Her beautiful green eyes were looking upon him with disappointment. "You interfered greatly with regular mortal lives—"

"They were not regular mortal lives," Harry interrupted. "They were mortal lives in peril because of another God breaking the rules! If anything I was upholding your rules!"

"Silence!" The Green Lady said, "Let me finish!" As if nothing had happened, she was suddenly calm and serious once again. "The punishment for revealing your identity as a mortal god is mandatory immediate termination of your mortal life and returning to Sky's End. Such as happened before, when the Double-Sided god revealed his identity on Earth."

Harry couldn't even speak, his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth as he stared at her in horror. In mortal terms, that was a death sentence.

"However, you did put yourself in harms way to protect the property of other deities, and yes, the rules as well. Also, it has been brought to my attention that this mortal lifetime holds particular significance to you as you were born into it. In light of this, we will waive the normal consequences."

Finally, Harry was able to breathe again.

"We have reversed the punishment. Instead of losing your mortal life, you will be barred from using your demi-god abilities for the rest of your normal lifetime. We will also have to halt the knowledge of your true identity. Aeyris, her daughter, and the Fraizhans will not be able to speak of it to any other mortals, much in the way that Lush was unable to speak about Intuition, only permanently."

Harry considered this, and finally nodded. It seemed harsh, but logical. As much as he didn't like it, he could handle not using any godlike powers for the time being. Eventually he would recover them.

"There is also the matter of your Father," The Green Lady looked over to where Alexander, who was really James, listened attentively.

"He will return along with the body he inhabits to Origin. Since he can be of help healing what our sister Intuition has done to the young man, he can do so until he is no longer needed."

James nodded, slipping an arm around Lily's shoulders and giving her a smile.

"And now for Intuition," The Green Lady said, and the audience stirred, coming back to rapt attention. Meanwhile, Harry relaxed as the spotlight moved on. Things could have been far worse, I suppose.

"Intuition is being held in a deep sleep to spare her further pain," The Green Lady announced. "We will keep her there until a solution is found to her problem. She is guilty of attacking another Goddess with attempt to end her existence, and has caused much harm to our people, some irreparable. Fortunately, she was stopped from going further in her plans to destroy Origin. In punishment, she will be confined to Sky's End and her use of her powers will be closely watched."

"One last thing," The Green Lady added, "This shapeshifter of Intuitions. I have heard rumors; I want it brought in so we can have a look at it. It will be hard to find, unless we catch it in the process of changing forms we will not be able to recognize it. Harry you may tell the mortal leaders to keep an eye out for it. That is all."

She nodded, and suddenly the trial seemed to be over. Gods and goddesses immediately became talking loudly amongst themselves, some with excitement, and others with disappointment.

Harry turned to Lush, astonished. "That's it? That's all that happens to Intuition, after everything she did?"

"They're taking her reasons into account, I guess," Lush said with a shrug. "She wasn't acting out of malicious intent; she was trying to preserve her own failing sanity. Surely you know that better than anyone, Hell Eyes."

Harry nodded in acceptance. "I suppose." He did feel a deep sympathy for Intuition. He definitely felt like she knew her like no one else did.

"Looks like they went pretty easy on you," Lush commented.

"You think? What was that all about, anyway, you being the 'victim'?" Harry asked.

Lush sighed. "Well... it has to do with the way Gods see things. You may not like it very much... they see mortals as property of the Gods that created them. The deaths of all the mortals that Intuition is responsible for are really just theft. However, Intuition attacking me is attempted murder, and she would have gotten off easy if it weren't for that. In the trial, I was considered the victim and Intuition the responsible party."

Harry blinked at her. "That's crazy."

Lush raised an eyebrow. "Well I was almost destroyed. I would have been, if it weren't for you."

"I didn't mean it like that," Harry said. "Of course she should be held responsible for what she did to you. All the people that died because of her, and it's just considered stealing?"

"Some Gods would disagree," Lush told him. "It's been a matter of contention for some centuries. Your mother argued about it some a while ago. But my parents are on the other side of the discussion, as are most of the gods and the laws of the gods have been in place for a long time."

"And you? What do you think?"

"I used to agree with my parents, but out of ignorance. This experience opened my eyes and changed everything for me."

Harry smiled approvingly at her, and noticed his parents and grandparents approaching. Lush saw them too and took a step closer to Harry.

"You'll go back to her now, won't you?" Lush murmured.

Enna. Harry nodded.

"Just remember," Lush said meaningfully. "Mortals aren't forever. I'll be waiting."

Suddenly she was gone, her vibrant colored hair trailing behind her as she mingled into the crowd.

Harry's mother gave him a big hug, and Harry squeezed her back. When she stepped back Dark Eyes put a heavy hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Thanks for everything," Harry said to his grandfather, who nodded nobly. "Will I still be able to come back to Sky's End?"

"Yes," MindRuin said, slipping up to give him a kiss on the cheek. Her silken veils caressed the side of his face. "You won't be able to use your powers, but you can still come and go. I hope you will visit us."

"Of course," Harry said. "Just when I was beginning to finally figure them out, too," he said disappointedly.

"You will have a very long time to discover them," His mother said reassuringly. "For now, just fully experience your life."

"I will," Harry promised, keeping in mind everything his mother had sacrificed for him to do so.

"Hopefully you got Fraizha right on the first try," Dark Eyes said. "If the whole thing collapses from instability, you won't be able to do anything."

Harry tried to figure out whether his grandfather was joking or being serious, but wasn't able to.

James just smiled with Alexander's face. "I'm glad everything worked out. Are you ready to return to Origin? It's been about a week down there since we left it."

Harry nodded. "I'm ready. Have you figured out how to port?"

"Yes," James assured him.

"To the City, then," Harry decided. "I think everyone will still be there."

They bid farewell to the others and disappeared, porting themselves high in the sky above the City. The wind was crisp and fresh, and Harry could see tents all along the bluffs from the visiting races, but otherwise everything in the City below appeared to be normal. Harry could see his father had the same exuberance about flying as he did himself, and together they spiraled and down through the clouds to the city. Harry relished the power of his wings and the beautiful view.

"You couldn't stay away from Quidditch at Hogwarts because of this, am I right?" Harry called to James.

James nodded. "I've always wondered... wouldn't it be fantastic to play Quidditch as Silents?"

"We should try it!" Harry said excitedly, and they grinned at each other.

They descended toward City Hall slowly, and they were spotted long before they arrived, and people spilled out onto the steps to watch them come. Harry saw Aeyris and Dumbledore among them.

"Harry!" Dumbledore called as they landed. "We were so worried, we saw you were hurt. I'm glad to see you've recovered."

It hadn't actually been Harry who was hurt, but James in Harry's body. Harry just nodded.

"Nonsense," Aeyris said to Dumbledore amicably. "The Gods themselves carried him off. I'm sure he's fine. That was marvelous, I

must say, seeing Dark Eyes himself." Her eyes sparkled, and she turned to James. "You must be the missing one then."

"In a way," James said vaguely.

"I'm glad to see you returned as well."

"ALEXANDER!" Ren burst out of the building, throwing herself at her older brother. James caught her and hugged her back, looking at her as if drinking up the sight of the niece he had never met.

Amanda, Lexian, Gray and Lord Laike were suddenly there, gasping in astonishment and calling out Alexander's name in excitement and relief.

"Can we have a moment of privacy?" Harry asked Aeyris and Dumbledore, who nodded uncomprehendingly and withdrew.

"You must be my grandson!" Lord Laike said, grasping James by the hand. He was pushed aside by Amanda, who threw herself at James much in the same way as Ren, tears in her eyes.

"Alexander, Harry, I'm so glad to see you're both okay," Lexian said.

"Not entirely..." James interrupted, looking reluctant to spoil the mood. Amanda drew back abruptly, confused. They fell silent.

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked tearfully. "Are you alright, Alex?"

"Alexander will be okay," Harry reassured them. "He was damaged and traumatized in ways that are hard to explain, but I will try. He wouldn't cooperate with Intuition, so she pushed out his soul so that she could dominate his body with her will. His soul is still here, tethered to his body, and it will take time for him to heal. The Gods allowed another soul to enter his body because it will help Alexander realize where he is and what he needs to do. It's someone Alexander will trust."

Lexian's expression was grave. "Who are you?" He demanded, stepping up to James.

"Lex, it's me..." James grasped Lexian's hand and smiled widely.

Lexian blinked disbelievingly. "... James?"

Gray's jaw dropped, looking closer at James. At his side, Ren squealed and gripped his arm.

James nodded. "It's me, brother."

"And you can help my son?"

James nodded again, and the two of them embraced roughly.

Lexian was shaking his head. "I don't believe it!" He couldn't seem to reconcile the conflicting emotions of happiness and concern.

"Can my son hear me?" Amanda asked, still standing back.

"I don't think so," James said. "But I think he will. Hearing your voices will hopefully pull him back where he belongs. I will then leave him to his life, but until then I may be the only person who can reach him."

Amanda took a deep calming breath. "Then I thank you." She smiled. "And I'm glad to see you again, James." She stepped in to give him another hug.

They didn't tell anyone outside of the family who Alexander really was, but they spread the news that their son had returned. In the commotion around the return of the mysteriously disappeared Portal Guide, Harry was able to slip away. Aeyris would be momentarily distracted.

Harry ported directly outside of Enna's bedroom, where he had last seen her lying pale and still. He didn't see anyone around in the hallway, and so he slowly eased the doorway open. There was only one person in the room, sitting at a far dresser with a large elaborate mirror, sorting through the contents of an open drawer.

Enna saw Harry's reflection and jumped to her feet, sending bits of jewelry and stones clattering down.

"Harry!" She said, and came running. To all appearances, she was fine.

"You can't believe how glad I am to see you're alright," Harry said, letting out a deep sigh. Even after facing the Gods, he hadn't truly been at ease until seeing Enna on her feet.

She said nothing, but threw her arms around him, pulling down his head to give him a deep kiss as she brought her body close to his.

It was a kiss unlike any other. Immediately Harry was consumed with no other thoughts, as a spark seemed to pass between them and for a moment they seemed to be melted together into one person. The kiss continued and Harry returned her embrace. Every trial he had been through, every painful memory and worry seemed to be washed away by cool soothing peace in Enna's presence.

It was like coming home.

Harry decided that wherever Enna was, that was home for him.

"Me too."

Harry stepped back, looking at her in surprise. The light around them had suddenly changed, from the candlelight of Enna's bedroom to near darkness, Harry couldn't place his surroundings. The stillness of the deep Pit was replaced by a gentle, fresh wind.

Harry blinked. He had heard Enna in his mind, and suddenly they were in a new and different place.

"Where are we?" Enna asked curiously, looking around.

"What did you just say?" Harry interrupted, "Before that?"

"Wherever you are is home to me too," she told him.

"But I was only thinking that! You answered me my thoughts."

Enna looked startled.

"I suppose I did..."

"But how can that be? Lush broke the bond between us irrevocably."

Enna shook her head. "Not irrevocably. Lush told me that herself, but she did a bad job of it. She said that I had to forgive you completely to bring back our bond, which is ridiculous, because it was done against your will. Once I realized that, I forgave you and felt embarrassed for ever doubting you in the first place. You were right to be angry with me."

"So?"

"The Goddess of Love and I spoke about it in my dreams. She explained that as long as I still had anger about the situation, anger at Lush and anger that what happened to you happened at all, that it would be a block holding us apart. It wasn't blame directed at one of us that broke the bond, it was the pain of the event. To fix the bond, I either had to forget the event happened at all, or forgive everyone involved. I thought it was hopeless, because I couldn't forget it, I couldn't forgive Lush and I was frustrated that you and I were separated because of it." Enna stopped, looking thoughtful.

"So what happened?" Harry prompted.

"I almost died, that's what happened. It changed my perspective, my priorities. Just now when we kissed, it was like nothing that happened in the past mattered at all, only the present, and that we are finally together again and everything is okay. What happened seems so slight in comparison with how we almost lost each other."

Harry nodded. "I know what you mean."

"Now can we finally figure out where on Origin we are?" Enna asked.

Harry laughed. Enna seemed somehow lighter, less timid. Perhaps their bond was balancing her out again.

"If only we had light," Harry said. All of a sudden, the room was filled with a subtle illumination. Harry was immediately suspicious. A light that didn't seem to have a source, and it had lit in response to his thoughts? That sounded like something that would only happen at Sky's End.

"Is this Hogwarts?" Enna asked, looking at the stone walls around them.

Harry frowned. The room was circular, with simple furniture, and the ancient stone walls suggested they were in Hogwarts. But he had never been in this room at Hogwarts before, and he hadn't created a portal to bring them there. There was a rounded window a few feet away, and the two of them walked over to look outside.

They were in a tower, but they were definitely not in Hogwarts.

"I don't think this is Origin," Harry murmured.

Enna nodded in agreement.

The stars were shining in the darkness outside the window... but they appeared to be below.

There were several more windows covered in dark velvety drapes that were almost the same color as the night sky outside. The even spacing of the windows was broken up on one side, where the top of a winding stairway led into the rest of the tower below. Harry led the way, and with Enna at his heels he began walking down the well worn steps. They passed many doors and many rooms, finally coming to a last door at the bottom of the steps.

"Let's see what's outside," Harry said, taking Enna's hand. She reached out with her other hand and pushed open the heavy wooden door.

Outside was the night sky. In front of them, a thin silver bridge elegantly arched down in front of them, directly onto the clouds below. Together they walked down the silver bridge and tested the cloud with their feet. It held both of them as if it were solid ground, so they stepped out upon the cloud and turned around, taking several steps backwards to see what they were looking at.

They had just stepped out of a large central tower; build solidly in the middle of the shifting clouds. It was surrounded by many smaller towers of the same ancient gray stone in varying sizes and heights. There were no towers that touched or were built together, but they were spanned by a series of delicate looking silver arches like shining spider webs, interconnecting them in a complicated pattern.

Such a structure alone, resting on the cloud, took Harry's breath away, but there was more. The cloud itself had a landscape on it. There were large dark stones that looked like they were made of shining black glass, almost but not quite translucent. There was a small stream, not of water, but of a silver substance that looked like liquid mercury. It ran in between several of the towers before dissolved into the cloud, occasionally sending up a gentle spray as it trickled over rocks.

Most remarkable were the flowers. Each petal on every flower was a single flame, radiating out in a fan from the center of the flower. They flickered, reflecting their glow in the glass rocks and the silver stream.

It was the most enchanting place Harry had ever seen. Enna was covering her mouth with her hand as she gazed upon the cloud landscape.

"What is this place?" she whispered. "Is this a God place, Harry?"

"I've never seen it before," he answered, "But I think so. Come with me." He led her over to the edge of the cloud and carefully peered over. Below he could see the lake Serenity had brought him across, and the stars floating upon it like sparkling dust motes in all directions.

"We're on a cloud, right above the barrier between the Void and the mortal plane," Harry explained. "It's a symbolic God place."

"How did we get here?"

"I don't know... look!" The cloud was drifting lower to the water below, and in the distance Harry saw a building on the surface of the water. In the distance it looked like a lantern, but as it came closer it was a recognizable glass building with a small fire inside.

They slowly drifted closer and closer. Harry knew the moment when Dark Eyes saw them; there was sudden movement inside the structure.

Once he saw them, Harry's grandfather was able to instantly bring himself to their side. He looked surprised, and as intense and formidable as usual.

"Grandfather, this is Enna," Harry introduced. "Enna this is Dark Eyes."

"Oh," Enna said, speechless.

"Hello dear," Dark Eyes said to her, "Nice to finally meet you." He immediately turned to Harry. "What are you doing here? What is this floating castle? Where did it come from?"

"I don't know," Harry said truthfully.

Dark Eyes turned away, looking up at the structure and the garden surrounding it. "How did you make this?" he demanded. "You've been blocked from your powers!" He shook his head, perplexed and frustrated.

"I didn't make it," Harry explained. "All of a sudden it was just here."

"It has your energy signature all over it, Harry, no one else could have made it," Dark Eyes told him.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't, I swear. I've never seen it before in my life. I can't even imagine coming up with something like this. I was with Enna, and suddenly we were here, and I don't know why." He

frowned. "It feels... it feels like home." It was a hard feeling to put into words.

"That's what you were thinking," Enna said suddenly, snapping out of her daze.

"What?"

"You were thinking about being home, with me," she reminded him. "Then we were here."

"It's definitely yours," Dark eyes confirmed. "I don't think anyone else can ever see or enter it without you here. It's tied to your presence." He shook his head. "I just don't understand it."

"Well maybe the God of Knowledge knows how this could have happened," Harry suggested. "We could ask him sometime. For now, I should be getting Enna back to the Pit before anyone notices she's missing."

"Very well," Dark Eyes said, but he didn't seem happy about it. Unsolvable riddles didn't sit right with him, Harry was sure this hadn't been the last he would hear from his grandfather about the mysterious castle. Dark Eyes nodded to Enna and disappeared.

"Let's go," Harry said. "We can come back and explore another time."

"I'd love to," Enna said.

Harry folded his wings around her and ported them both back into Enna's room.

It was not empty. Aeyris was waiting in a chair by the bed, her eyes suspicious. "Well, well." She said icily.

Harry looked at her curiously. "We've restored our bond," Harry said. "Surely, now that you know the truth about me, you can't still think I'm not good enough for her?"

Aeyris shook her head. "I don't know what to think," she said in a slightly more gentle tone. "Knowing that Dark Eyes' grandson is with my daughter will take some getting used to." She sighed in acceptance. "I hope you did it right this time," Aeyris addressed the last sentence to Harry.

"Excuse me?" he asked, stunned and confused.

"The sex part."

"Did it right?" Harry could feel his jaw hanging open as he stared at her in shock. Enna just looked blankly at her mother. "But we didn't—" "

"Oh," Aeyris said in a different tone. She looked sheepish for a moment, but then her resolve returned and she crossed her arms determinedly.

"Explain what you mean, Mother," Enna requested.

"It will be a relief when you are pregnant," Aeyris explained almost reluctantly. "At some point I wish to start training a royal heir."

"Enna is your royal heir," Harry pointed out, narrowing his eyes. He didn't like where Aeyris was going with this.

"No," Aeyris said. "Not really."

Enna looked hurt, and she frowned as she waited for her mother to continue.

"I'm sorry to be so blunt, Enna," Aeyris said, "And this is an inappropriate moment, considering you are only just recovering from your near death experience. I wouldn't have said anything if I hadn't been mistaken... but I should be honest. I haven't held out any hope for you becoming queen, not for a long time now. You don't have the strength it takes to run the Silent Empire; it's a difficult and complicated thing to do. It's much too stressful for you, that is obvious to me. It's long been my hope that in time, you would have a non-Healer daughter that I can train to be my successor."

"And skip right over me," Enna said, getting right to the point.

"Yes."

"What does that make me?" Enna demanded, her voice rising in anger, "Your brood mare for your precious royal heir?"

Aeyris blinked in surprise. Whatever answer she had been expecting, that hadn't been it.

"Sorry to ruin your little plans," Enna shouted furiously, "But I won't be used that way. If that's how you will treat me, then you'll never see any of your grandchildren, ever! How dare you!" She breathed heavily, trying to control some of the sudden, overwhelming anger. If she had been a Portal Guide, her eyes would have been glowing. Harry recognized some of the deep passionate emotion as something he had experienced himself many times. It seems their bond, functioning again, was allowing Enna full access to her feelings without the usual blanket of fear to dampen them.

This was the true Enna, righteously enraged by something she found insulting, unfettered by the unnatural fear that the touch of the gods had put upon her mind. Finally she could completely be herself, not 'a shadow of a person' as she had once put it.

Aeyris finally closed her mouth, completely taken aback. "Well..."

"Well, Mother?" Enna said, using the word like a knife of sarcasm.

"You would propose to be my heir?" Aeyris asked. "You would learn everything I have to teach you?"

"It's my birthright," Enna pointed out. "I want it."

"Well then," Aeyris still seemed like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Then we will start right away." Mother and daughter looked at each other as if seeing each other for the first time.

Harry stood back, proud and amazed.

“What about Harry?” Aeyris pointed out.

“He will go back to Hogwarts,” Enna said immediately. “If Dumbledore takes him back, and if I’ve judged him correctly at all he will, and Harry will finish school at Hogwarts with his friends and perhaps Ren. That’s what he’s always wanted, and I’m not going to try to keep him here. I’ll miss him, but I can miss him for a little while.” She gave Harry a private smile.

“Of course,” Harry said.

“You’ll come back to me?” Enna waited expectantly, her golden eyes resting on his face.

Harry nodded, leaning down to give her a brief kiss. “Always.”

## Epilogue

### Eight Years Later.

The doorway to Sky's End was a special place. Since it wasn't strictly necessary for its inhabitants, the doorway had begun as a mere symbol, but now it had taken on a deeper purpose, a decisive point between the land of the mortals and the realm of the gods.

Harry didn't care about any of this. He was preoccupied with his own purpose.

Over the ages the platform had been unused for periods of time too long for mortal comprehension and it had the tendency to take on a deep silence, a quality of stillness that resisted being broken even when intruded upon. The only evidences of Harry's sudden appearance were a few muffled footsteps and a dark cloaked figure nearly soaked up by the velvety night sky.

Harry's arms were full, he shifted his burden slightly. They always seemed heavier when they slept.

The door opened for him, recognizing him. He came and went through that door more than most. Inside, there was a soft glowing light that filled the round room, seeming coming from nowhere. Dark Eyes and MindRuin waited there, accompanied by Lily and The Green Lady. They stood in the center of the room confidently, but back against the far wall where the light wasn't as bright Luscious leaned inconspicuously, eyes on Harry. She didn't seem to want to be acknowledged, but she had come to witness.

"You know why I'm here," Harry said, breaking the silence.

The four Gods in the center of the room nodded their heads in confirmation.

"I suspected," The Green Lady said in a soft voice, "From the beginning, when they first entered the world into my hands. But with such remarkable children, it's difficult to predict."

Lily smiled a little in Harry's direction at the word remarkable. "I've watched." Her parents nodded.

Harry laid them on the ground, wrapped in their snug blankets, and unfolded the wrappings to look down upon the twins. They were both girls, legacy of a line that only produced queens. One, like their mother, had snowy white Healer wings and short tufts of pale hair. The other had wings that were pitch black.

It hadn't always been that way. At first they had been identical; the same small faces with medium grayish brown hair and wings that were thin with almost translucent feathers. Over the last year and a half Harry and Enna had watched while one had become paler and more golden, and the other grayer and darker. Eventually they had settled on the telltale white and black.

Only Harry, Enna and Aeyris knew; they hadn't broken the news yet. Enna didn't seem to care. Harry worried. Aeyris kept her expressions emotionless, as still as a statue. Whatever she felt was locked inside for a moment, and that couldn't possibly be good news.

The one with the black wings, Lyla, woke up, looking up drowsily with her violet-blue eyes. Harry sat back on his heels, looking down on her fondly for a minute before turning back to his audience.

"A female Portal Guide?" He addressed the onlookers. "How is that possible?"

"You are a born God, that's how," Dark Eyes told him. "Born Gods can be dangerous and unpredictable. That's why most of the Gods were created, not born. They are formed independently in the Void, and they begin from raw material. When Gods have children... since we don't have a physical form, the children are created by pooling our very essence together. Your god-from is made from the very essence of MindRuin and myself. The rules that were set when we created the Healers and the Portal Guides don't apply to you. It is exactly the same as the porting restriction around the barrier."

"What will happen to them? Are they demigods, too?"

"That is yet to be seen," MindRuin told him. "They may have the power, they may not."

Lily stepped forward and kneeled beside Lyla. "Hello little one," she murmured. Lyla blinked up at her grandmother, who had inspired her name.

"You'll bring them to visit?" MindRuin asked.

Harry nodded. "I will."

He glanced at Lush. She wasn't looking at him; her eyes were locked on the twins. He couldn't read her expression, it was somehow complex. There was an unexpected fondness, and underneath a deeper anxiety that made Harry slightly uneasy. Lush would never hurt his children, he knew that, but what made her look at them like that?

"I should get back," Harry said.

As Harry wrapped the twins back up in their blankets to return them to their bed, his family said farewell, touching him reassuringly on the shoulder before departing with the Green Lady. As Harry gathered up his children, Lush was the only one left.

"Wait," she said, stepping forward. Harry looked at her curiously.

"Can I hold her?" Lush asked.

"Alright," Harry said, surprised. Lia still slept, so he handed over the one and a half year old Lyla, who was now awake and ready to explore.

Lyla wriggled, but then noticed Lush's strange red eyes and reached out to touch one. Lush held her out of reach, murmuring something.

"What was that?" Harry asked, but Lush just shrugged.

"She's beautiful," Lush said, "Be sure to take good care of her. Don't let Aeyris or any one else with prejudices treat her badly."

"I won't let anything happen to them," Harry assured her, pleased by her concern.

The two young gods smiled at each other. They were more than friends, but less than lovers, but somehow they had settled into that strange in between place and had become comfortable there.

Lush looked back up at Harry, and once again Harry saw the unfathomable message there. Was she about to say something? She couldn't exactly be happy that someone she had feelings for like she did for Harry had children with another woman. Whatever it was, she quelled it and leaned down and gave Lyla a kiss above her wide, curious violet eyes.

For now, all was well.

Author's Note: This is the end. I hope you enjoyed the ride! I certainly did, I've been working on Hell Eyes for seven years and I'm glad I stuck with it.

There is a sequel that can be found in my profile called "Cursed Beauty", I posted the first chapter already. The sequel will be about Harry's daughter Lyla, but parts will still be from Harry's point of view. It will have new important characters, including a shapeshifter and a new god. Everything left unfinished will be revealed, including what happened to all the other characters since the last chapter. Lush will be back, as will Xaxx. I think of it as a continuation of Hell Eyes, go check it out.

My review question: What was your favorite chapter of Hell Eyes? And why?